



Republic of Korea

Assessment: Good

Trend: ↔

Capital: Seoul

Type of Government: Republic

Head of Government: President Kim Dae-jung
(since 25 February 1998)

Minister of Foreign Affairs: Song-hong Ch'oe

Population: 47,904,370

Human Development Index Ranking: 27

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Republic of Korea (R.O.K) has a good record of support for democracy abroad, as evidenced by its willingness to monitor elections, support international resolutions condemning undemocratic regimes, and host international democracy fora. Its foreign policy remains focused mostly on the United States, its main security ally, and North Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea or DPRK), its principal security threat, but the R.O.K has become more active in the global community of states, sometimes playing a leadership role in international organizations. Economic and security considerations sometimes take precedence over democratic ideals, however, particularly when responding to oil-producing states.

As a newly democratizing country itself, the R.O.K has only recently begun to actively support democracy worldwide. In the early 1990s, the R.O.K was just emerging from three decades of military rule. The 1992 election of Kim Young Sam brought to power the first civilian leader in the R.O.K since 1961. Pro-democracy activities have notably increased since the 1997 election of former dissident and long-time democracy activist Kim Dae Jung, including the participation in, and hosting of, international democracy fora. Critics have charged, however, that Kim's obsession with his "sunshine policy" of constructive engagement toward North Korea has undermined R.O.K support for human rights and democratic principles.

FOREIGN POLICY BACKGROUND

Since the Korean War, R.O.K foreign policy has been dominated by two key concerns: how to deal with North Korea and, closely related to this, Seoul's strong military and political alliance with the United States. With a single, overarching security concern and heavy dependence on a superpower ally, the R.O.K has been slow to develop an independent, globally-focused foreign policy. This began to change gradually with the end of the Cold War. Then-President Roh Tae Woo launched a series of initiatives jointly known as "Nordpolitik." Key among these was a decision to open relations with North Korea's two main allies, China and Russia. There has been little progress in the relationship with the latter, due mainly to Russia's economic malaise and declining influence in North Korea. However, China has emerged as arguably the Republic of Korea's most important diplomatic partner outside of the United States. The two countries are now major trading partners, and Seoul often looks to Beijing to play a mediating role with Pyongyang. Another notable success of Roh's policy was the joint admission of both Koreas to the United Nations in 1991, which put an end to the decades-old contest for legitimacy between the two and paved the way for an increased international role for the R.O.K.

President Kim Young Sam tried to expand the R.O.K's foreign policy focus through the implementation of a globalization (*saegae-hwa*) policy. Following its rise from one of the poorest nations of the world to one qualified for admission to the wealthier club of states at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), South Korea was held up as an example of economic and democratic development for Third World nations to emulate. Although primarily focused on economics, under the



globalization policy, Seoul's diplomatic activities were expanded to geographic areas that it had traditionally ignored, such as Africa and Latin America. In practice, this frequently amounted to little more than enticing North Korea's third world allies to switch allegiances with offers of aid or investment. The Asian financial crisis of 1997 spelled the end of the globalization policy, as revelations of widespread corruption greatly undermined the R.O.K's claims to serve as a role model.

The 1997 election of former dissident Kim Dae Jung brought to power a leader with an international reputation as a pro-democracy activist. Kim, who survived imprisonment and assassination attempts under the military dictatorships of Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo Hwan, had spent the years before his election cultivating relationships with other regional democratic leaders through the Kim Dae Jung Peace Foundation for Asia Pacific and the Forum of Democratic Leaders in Asia Pacific (FDL-AP), which he had helped to found in 1994. Kim's "sunshine policy" of engagement with North Korea, along with his lifelong pro-democracy activities, resulted in his receiving the 2000 Nobel Peace Prize.

As part of the sunshine policy, the R.O.K has encouraged other states, especially in the European Union, to take a more active role in engaging North Korea. In addition, the R.O.K. has cultivated relations with states that may be able to influence Pyongyang, especially China and, more recently, Cuba. Proponents of the sunshine policy argue that bringing North Korea more into the international community will help open the country to gradual economic and political reform, lessening the negative impacts of eventual reunification. North Korea's recent price and wage reforms have been cited as an indication that it is slowly creeping toward reform. Critics, however, charge that the policy makes too many concessions to Pyongyang, ignores the principle of reciprocity, and fails to address the numerous human rights violations by the communist regime. In this view, North Korea is an irredeemable dictatorship that must be contained to prevent it from embarking on its ultimate goal of communizing the whole peninsula by force. Instead of paving the way for long-run democratization in North Korea, they argue that the sunshine policy is only helping to prolong the Kim Jong Il regime and allowing it to continue its

egregious human rights violations. Moreover, Kim has also been accused of resorting to undemocratic measures to silence his domestic opponents. International democracy activists, meanwhile, have also criticized Kim's failure to repeal the National Security Law, which allows the government to jail citizens whose activities are seen as supportive of North Korea's position on reunification.

While the sunshine policy represents a more aggressive approach toward engagement of North Korea, R.O.K governments have always used a mixture of carrots and sticks in dealing with North Korea. As part of his "Nordpolitik," Roh Tae-Woo signed the North-South Basic Agreement, which called for peaceful co-existence, denuclearization, and confidence-building measures, but the specifics of the agreement were never implemented. The Kim Young-Sam government generally took a skeptical line toward engagement with the DPRK, but did join the light-water reactor project negotiated by the United States, provided food aid to the North, and launched the four-party talks, which while ultimately unsuccessful, did bring the DPRK to the negotiating table with both the R.O.K and the U.S. for the first time.

RESPONSE TO OVERTHROW OF DEMOCRATICALLY-ELECTED GOVERNMENTS

Overall, the recent response of the R.O.K to the overthrow of democratically-elected governments abroad has been good. Although it does not as a rule resort to unilateral sanctions against coup leaders, it has generally been supportive of international efforts to condemn coups, occasionally taking the lead in getting resolutions passed in the UN and other international bodies. When democratic governments have been restored after a coup, the R.O.K has been quick to recognize them, often being the first nation to invite a newly-elected leader to visit. However, there have also been occasions when economic interests have caused the R.O.K. to adopt a more muted response to the overthrow of an elected government.

In Africa, where the R.O.K has minimal interests, it has been quick to condemn overthrows of democratic governments. The R.O.K froze relations with Cote d'Ivoire following the 1999 coup d'etat. In 1997, while serving as President of the United Nations Security Council during the Kim Young Sam administration, the R.O.K



strongly condemned the overthrow of the government of President Kabbah in Sierra Leone. It supported sanctions by the UN and the Economic Committee of West African States (ECOWAS) against the military junta, and called for maintaining relations with the legitimate government in exile.¹ The R.O.K supported the 1995 UN Human Rights Declaration on Nigeria, to the detriment of its relations with that oil-exporting country, and was quick to praise the restoration of democracy with the election of President Olusegun Obasanjo, inviting Obasanjo to Seoul shortly after he took power.²

In the Americas, the R.O.K's record has been somewhat more mixed. With regards to Haiti, the R.O.K strongly supported the establishment of a United Nations Police Mission in Haiti (MIPONUH) to help train the Haitian National Police as part of the effort to restore democracy in that country, and contributed \$500,000 to the effort. In Ecuador, the R.O.K did not condemn the coup d'état itself. However, it did issue a statement praising the return to civilian rule under President (former Vice President) Gustavo Noboa as in line with the constitutional process, and inviting Noboa to Seoul in March 2002.³ The R.O.K remained silent on the 2002 coup in Venezuela, most likely because of its relationship with the United States (which opposed the democratically-elected Chavez government), and because Venezuela is an oil-exporting state. South Korea remains heavily dependant on foreign oil for the majority of its energy needs.

In the former Yugoslavia, the R.O.K has been supportive of international efforts to restore peace and democracy to the region, consistently voting for resolutions critical of the Milosevic regime, and sending election monitors to Bosnia on two occasions. The R.O.K did not actively oppose the coup in Fiji, however. In fact, the R.O.K was the one of the first countries to restore air travel to Fiji in August 2000, and continued naval visits despite the lack of a restoration of democracy there.⁴ The R.O.K. response to this particular case can not be explained by an overriding economic interest, and is thus quite inconsistent with its strong support of democracy evidenced in other similar cases.

In Asia, President Kim Dae Jung has long-standing relationships with many democratic leaders, especially through FDL-AP. While not actively condemning the coup in Pakistan, Kim did continue contacts with civilian leaders there,

inviting exiled former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto to Seoul in May 2001.⁵ Seoul was slow to respond to the deterioration of Philippine President Estrada's administration, inviting him to Seoul shortly before his removal from office. The R.O.K, however, accepted Estrada's removal as within the bounds of a constitutional process. In Indonesia, the R.O.K was strongly supportive of the return to civilian rule under Abdurahim Wahid, another leader with whom Kim Dae Jung had a prior existing relationship, and was one of the first nations to recognize the new government there. At the same time, the R.O.K was extremely active in supporting the establishment of a democratic and independent East Timor, providing peacekeeping forces, election monitors, and financial aid, and becoming the first government to open a diplomatic mission in the newly independent state.

RESPONSE TO MANIPULATION OF ELECTORAL PROCESSES

The R.O.K has had a fair response to the manipulation of elections abroad, providing strong support for international election monitoring efforts, but failing to take active measures against countries that engage in electoral fraud.

The R.O.K has strongly supported election monitoring efforts abroad, and has endorsed the findings of international election monitors. It has provided electoral assistance and monitoring to Cambodia (1993, 1997), South Africa (1994), Mozambique (1994), Bosnia & Herzegovina (1996), and East Timor (1999).

Other than joining international condemnation of Nigeria, which led to a freezing of relations with that country, the R.O.K has been rather silent on electoral manipulations. It has continued to maintain relations with Algeria, first established in 1990, despite electoral irregularities there. It has cultivated good relations with Cambodia, despite the 1998 flawed elections, providing Phnom Penh with development aid in the belief that Cambodia, which traditionally has had a very close relationship with North Korea, can be an ally in support of the sunshine policy.⁶

The R.O.K's reluctance to take a stronger stand against electoral manipulation may stem from its own history of such malpractice. Although electoral irregularities have greatly decreased since Chun Doo Hwan stepped down in 1987, they do occur. In the last presidential election, elements of the R.O.K intelligence agency conspired in an attempt to portray Kim Dae



Jung as a North Korean agent in the so-called “Northern Wind” scandal. All three of the most recent presidents have been tied to varying degrees to a slush fund created by former dictator Chun Doo Hwan. These electoral irregularities greatly undermine the R.O.K.’s moral authority to criticize manipulation of elections in other states.

PROMOTION OF INTERNATIONAL DEMOCRACY

The Republic of Korea has a very good record of supporting democracy internationally, especially during the administration of Kim Dae Jung, when it has often assumed a leading role in pushing pro-democracy resolutions at the United Nations and other international fora. The R.O.K. has voted for all UN resolutions calling for strengthening the UN role in the democratic process. At the same time, it has voted against resolutions calling for non-interference in other countries’ electoral processes, viewing the resolution as a justification for electoral manipulation. The R.O.K. has also spoken at the United Nations in support of democratic transitions in South Africa and Nigeria.⁷

The R.O.K. participated in all of the UN-sponsored Conferences of New or Restored Democracies. It hosted the International Conference on Democracy, Market Economy and Development in February 1999. It also hosted the Inaugural Conference of the Democracy Forum in July of that year, at which President Kim strongly disputed the notion that democracy is incompatible with Asian values.⁸ Seoul was instrumental in establishing the International Conference of the Community of Democracies in Warsaw, Poland in June 2000, and will host the Second Ministerial Conference in November 2002.

The R.O.K.’s capacity to support the democracy agenda is derived from its status as a new donor nation, its strong participation in international fora, and its own experience of having undergone the transition from dictatorship to democracy. The R.O.K. has been particularly active in promoting the establishment of a democratic government in East Timor. Since 1999, it has sent four separate units of peacekeepers to join UN efforts in East Timor. It was the eleventh country to establish a diplomatic mission in the newly independent country, and became the first country to initiate full diplomatic relations when East Timor officially gained independence on 20 May 2002. It supported the

establishment of a United Nations Mission of Support in East Timor (UNMISET) to replace the UN Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET). It also argued against a premature reduction of the UN peacekeeping presence in the country “until East Timor achieves an integrated democratic system, with a strong enough set of institutions that are necessary to that end,”⁹ while at the same time pushing for an early transition to East Timorese independence. In addition to supplying over 400 peacekeeping troops, the R.O.K. contributed US\$1,250,000 for humanitarian assistance and other programs. In Afghanistan, the R.O.K. contributed US\$12 million in humanitarian assistance, and strongly supported the establishment of the interim government under Hamid Karzai.

Since the mid-1980s, the R.O.K. has been an international donor nation, providing a total of \$1.7 billion in overseas development aid (ODA) over the past decade. However, it does not have a policy of targeting any portion of that aid specifically for the promotion of democracy, as the government believes that supporting economic and social development will eventually lead to democratic development as well.

POLICY TOWARD ENTRENCHED DICTATORSHIPS

The R.O.K. has only a fair record of supporting democratic change in entrenched dictatorships. Its policy toward entrenched dictatorships largely derives from its unusual status as one half of a divided country. The main driving factor in many of these cases is the overwhelming concern of the Kim Dae Jung administration with the sunshine policy toward North Korea, which has led to closer relations with non-democratic regimes, like China and Cuba, that have ties to Pyongyang. Elsewhere, it has generally been willing to take actions against dictatorships except where economic or security concerns predominated.

Political and economic interests are paramount in South Korea’s relations with China. Since normalizing relations in 1993, the two countries have emerged as major trading partners. China also plays a crucial role in R.O.K. attempts to engage the North Koreans. Many political and economic contacts between South and North Koreans take place in China. Recently, the growing problem of DPRK refugees has created a diplomatic problem for China-R.O.K. relations.



The R.O.K has attempted to push China to take a humanitarian approach to the crisis, while respecting China's concerns about sovereignty. Critics have called on the R.O.K to take a more aggressive approach to force China to provide aid to the refugees, and have proposed that the UN High Commissioner for Refugees be allowed to take over the problem. Others, however, including many NGOs, argue that a quieter approach—one that avoids antagonizing China—may be more effective for aiding the refugees and preventing a crackdown by the Beijing government. The importance of economic and security ties with Beijing also led the R.O.K government to refuse a request by Korean Buddhist groups to invite the Dalai Lama to Seoul, even though the Tibetan leader was, like President Kim Dae Jung, a former recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize.

Elsewhere in the world, the R.O.K. under President Kim Dae Jung has supported a range of UN resolutions criticizing authoritarian regimes. In the case of Nigeria, relations between the two countries worsened when the R.O.K agreed to the adoption of the Nigeria Human Rights Resolution at the December 1995 session of the UN General Assembly. Relations were restored after Obasanjo became President. The Kim Dae Jung government has also taken a critical stance toward Sudan, consistently voting to condemn Sudan's human rights record in the UN. Previously, the Kim Young Sam government had abstained from such votes. In the case of Iraq, the R.O.K has supported all Security Council resolutions and General Assembly criticisms of the Saddam Hussein regime. Similarly, although the Kim Young Sam government had been rather slow to respond to the situation in Bosnia, the R.O.K has consistently supported all UN resolutions regarding former Yugoslavia since the

inauguration of Kim Dae Jung. However, with Libya, which is a major exporter of oil to the R.O.K and where South Korean construction firms are quite active, the R.O.K has maintained a close relationship.

Cuba, a long-time ally of North Korea, is one of the few countries with which the R.O.K has no formal diplomatic relations. Recently, however, the R.O.K has attempted to improve ties with Cuba as part of its overall strategy of engaging North Korea. Since 1999, the R.O.K has voted for the first time for the annual UN resolution calling for the lifting of the U.S. embargo against Cuba. It has continued to support criticisms of Cuba's human rights record in the General Assembly, however. Recently, the two countries have begun to discuss opening trade offices in each other's capitals, and R.O.K National Assembly Speaker Lee Man-Sup proposed in 2001 that Fidel Castro make a visit to both Seoul and Pyongyang, although the Cuban government failed to respond to the proposal.¹⁰

The case of Burma provides an interesting comparison of the R.O.K's policy toward other entrenched dictatorships. On the one hand, President Kim Dae Jung has a very close personal relationship with Burmese democracy activist Aung San Suu Kyi, who is on the board of directors of FDL-AP. Kim hosted a conference in Seoul to discuss NGO strategies for promoting democratization in Burma. On the other hand, the government has not put pressure on R.O.K companies to divest from Burma, and South Korea remains one of the leading foreign investors operating in the country. This case shows how vested interests can undermine the government's policy toward entrenched dictatorships even when the president has a personal connection to the issue.

¹ H.E. Ambassador Park Soo Gil, Permanent Representative of the R.O.K to the UN. "The Situation in Sierra Leone," speech to the UN, at the 3822nd Meeting of the Security Council, 8 Oct. 97.

² Kim Dae-Jung, President R.O.K. "Remarks By President Kim At A State Dinner For President Olusegun Obasanjo," 21 July 2000.

³ Ilbo, Hankook. "Seoul Recognizes New Ecuador Government." 28 Jan. 2000.

⁴ Information on the R.O.K's relations with Fiji is available at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website: http://www.mofat.go.kr/mission/emb/ww_data_view_en.mof?b_code=ww13&seq_no=3788&si_dcode=FJ-FJ.

⁵ Chung, Hye-jean. "Bhutto Calls for Equal Rights for Women." *Korea Times* 5 March 2001.

⁶ As is often the case in Korean politics, North Korean-Cambodian relations have a strong personal basis, as the late North Korean President Kim Il Sung provided asylum to ousted Prince Norodom Sihanouk. Kim Dae Jung's



cultivation of relations with Hun Sen, who has often been at odds with the Sihanouk family, can be seen as an attempt to counterbalance this relationship.

⁷ H.E. Suh Dae-won, Deputy Permanent Representative. "Agenda Item 46: Causes of Conflict and the Promotion of Durable Peace and Sustainable Development in Africa," speech at the UN. at the 54th Session of the General Assembly, 12/09/99.

⁸ Kim Dae-Jung, President R.O.K. "Congratulatory Message By President Kim Dae-Jung," speech at the Inaugural Conference - Challenges for Asian Democracy in the 21st Century: Setting the Agenda for the Democracy Forum.

⁹ Kim Young-mok, Charge d'Affaires. "The Situation in East Timor," speech at the Open Debate of the Security Council on East Timor, 26 Jan. 2001.

¹⁰ "Korea, Cuba move to establish trade offices" Korea Herald, 6 April 2001.