

December 1, 1997

To: DRL - Steve Coffey

From: DRL - George Lister^{TV}

Subject: South Korea's December Presidential Election

South Korea's presidential election is scheduled for December 18. For some of the reasons briefly mentioned below it may well turn out to be one of the more memorable contests in South Korean history, with major significance for democracy and human rights. The election campaign has become one of unusual tension, controversy, confusion and contradiction, with much shifting in party alliances, accusations and allegations, changes in party names, etc. And of course the tension has been greatly increased by the current economic crisis, resulting in South Korea's call for major help from the IMF. Now we are coming down to the final two weeks.

As things stand now there are three candidates: Kim Dae Jung (KDJ), Lee Hoi Chang (Lee), and Rhee In Je (Rhee). The polls keep shifting, but at the moment KDJ may hold a slight lead over Lee, with Rhee in third place. KDJ, now 72, has run and lost in three previous elections, and this is obviously his last chance. As the most liberal of the candidates, his political career of over 25 years had included six years in jail and about ten more under house arrest, plus kidnapping and exile. KDJ moved into first place a couple of months ago, soon after he was joined by Kim Jong Pil, a conservative opposition leader who, incredibly, served with the earlier military government and was involved in the persecution of KDJ.

Lee, around 62, is a former Supreme Court Justice and the candidate of the ruling party. His campaign was hurt early on by charges that his two sons had avoided mandatory military service. However, Lee has recently been

recovering in the polls. He has taken over as the ruling party boss, following the resignation from the party of President Kim Young Sam, who has been badly hurt by the economic crisis.

Rhee is a former provincial governor who left the ruling party after finishing second to Lee in the presidential nomination process. He is 49 and is calling for a new generation of leadership.

The three candidates are now scheduled to participate in three public TV debates, on December 1, 7 and 14. The debates could well have a major impact on the outcome. Steve Costello, head of the local KDJ Peace Foundation, feels KDJ is the best public speaker of the three candidates, and he is therefore inclined to be optimistic as to the results. Attached are some poll samples which Steve faxed me in early November, before Lee began his fast recovery (attachment 1).

It should be noted that a KDJ victory would be the first time that an opposition has wrested the presidency away from the dominant party. To quote one U.S. academic specialist in Asian affairs: "If this were to happen it would be the first peaceful transfer of power through constitutional means in Korean history and a major watershed in Asian history, as well If it were to occur it would be eloquent testimony to Korea's political sophistication".

As you know, South Korea was long ruled by military governments. 1987 was the first election after liberalization. On that occasion the opposition (KDJ and Kim Young Sam) was divided, and the government stayed in power. But this time the government party is divided.

As mentioned before, I have long been impressed by South Koreans. They have made incredible progress since the Korean War. Among other things, they are now credited with having the fourth highest percentage of college grad-

uates per capita in the world. They have a lot on the ball, but they are going to be severely tested.

Obviously a free and peaceful election, followed by significant economic recovery, would be in the interests of democracy and human rights. I feel our Embassy has done a good job in maintaining and emphasizing our neutrality in this election. Laney was a fine Ambassador, and Bosworth is now taking over with a very good record.

From the much longer perspective, of course, the political progress has been simply amazing. When KDJ first came here in 1983, as a political exile, there was State Department reluctance to even meet with him, as described in the attached excerpt from my 1985 performance evaluation by Elliott Abrams (attachment 2).

Another example of how support for human rights has given us a much better, and more effective, foreign policy.

cc: John Shattuck, Gare Smith, Susan O'Sullivan

1

For George Lister

	11/5/97	11/8/97	11/6-8/97	11/8/97	11/8/97	11/8/97
	Hankok	Gallop	Joongang	Han-Koreh	Kyunghyan	YanhapTV
Kim DJ	39.9	35.7	37	35.3	35.6	37.7
Rhee IJ	32.3	28	31.6	28.1	31.3	30.5
Lee HC	15.7	21.4	25.7	21	20.7	25.5

Three-Way Race

