

First step to democracy

Now that the tear gas has cleared, it seems clear that South Korea's recent election was generally honest and fair.

Charges by opposition parties that winner Roh Tae Woo fixed the vote are simply not supported by any evidence in what was a most closely monitored election. Irregularities there were, to be sure, but nothing to equal elections in places like Chicago where even the dead regularly rise up to vote for the Democrats. Without these voters from the great beyond, the now sainted Jack Kennedy would have lost to Richard Nixon.

South Korea's two opposition leaders, Kim Dae Jung and Kim Yong Sam, split the vote. If they had united, the government would have been kicked out of office. But neither Kim (26% of all Koreans are confusingly surnamed Kim), would agree to see the other as leader and so defeat was inevitable.

Instead of taking their loss like good sports, however, the two beaten Kims were fast off the mark with charges of vote fraud; from their hot-headed supporters came calls for revolt.

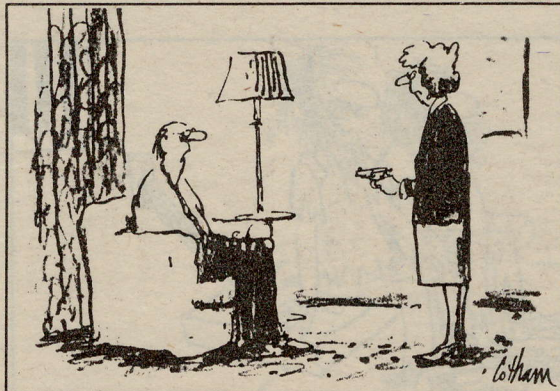
This sore-loser syndrome is too bad, because it partially obscured South Korea's very real achievement in holding a proper, reasonably honest national vote in a country that has never before had free elections.

One might wonder if the army, which has ruled South Korea for decades, would have permitted a truly free vote if there had been only one opposition candidate who did not split the vote. That's speculation. The fact remains that South Korea has taken the longest and hardest step in transforming itself from a military oligarchy into a budding democracy.

Praise is due to the current president, Chun Doo Hwan, and to Roh Tae Woo for taking this successful gamble.

Particularly when Kim Dae Jung made menacing remarks about exacting revenge, should he win, on South Korea's former military junta. Kim narrowly escaped being murdered twice during his years of exile by South Korean agents. There are many old, and quite nasty scores to settle in Seoul.

Punch



"We've been married 26 years, Mary. You could at least give me a chance to run for it."

ERIC MARGOLIS



Sadly, this is not just a South Korean problem.

Making the transition from dictatorship or oligarchy to real democracy is a daunting challenge, one that is far more complex and difficult than most of us even begin to understand. In many Third World nations, political power means winner take all: Getting rich as fast as you can; sticking cronies and relatives in cushy jobs; and hanging on to power as long as possible.

Political compromise, sharing power and the peaceful change of parties, three basic tenets of western democracies, are largely unknown in the rest of the world. Giving up power, as South Korea's current leader Chun Doo Hwan seemed ready to do, could have cost him his life.

Or, take the case of Pakistan, a nation that is struggling mightily toward building a working democracy in spite of dizzying political, ethnic, social and historical hurdles. President Zia told me he would retire in 1990 — but what about opposition leaders who demand his head? Who will protect the leaders of the regime if it peacefully gives up power. Must they all flee into exile?

Who will even protect them from terrorists and vengeance-seekers once they are out of office?

Imagine India's Rajiv Gandhi retired, without the dense state security apparatus that now only barely protects him from Sikh assassins. Or an ex-president Botha, living in a South Africa ruled by the African National Congress.

Military rulers in the Third World won't soon forget the example of Argentina. There, the military reluctantly took power when the civilian regime gave up; it crushed the murderous Marxist urban terrorists with equally murderous methods. When civilian government was restored, the generals went to prison for doing the dirty work many Argentines wanted done.

If Kim Dae Jung or Kim Yong Sam had won the election in South Korea, they would probably have begun major purges in that nation's armed forces. This, in turn, might have sparked a coup. Roh Tae Woo's victory spares South Koreans this ugly scenario and provides the best possible foundation for an orderly and not-too-stressful transition to democracy.

Remember, too, that a nation isn't a democracy just because it has a reasonably honest election. Also needed to make a real democracy are a free press, mature political parties, unions, an independent judiciary and a fixed constitution that is religiously observed. These are all things that take time, practice and co-operation — and perhaps a generation to develop.

South Korea has made the first, and hardest step and is now on the way to becoming one of the world's more important industrial democracies.