February 20, 2004

Dear Subscriber,

It has been almost a year since the President Roh, Moo Hyun took office on February 25, 2003. The changes that have taken place in various fields in the year since the launch of the Participatory Government are sometimes described as a sea change. These changes giving a new orientation to the Republic of Korea are here reviewed in a series of five articles covering politics, diplomacy and national security, personnel management, top policy goals and the media relations.

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Sincerely,

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Changes under the Participatory Government in the First Year: (1) Politics

**Self-sacrifice Sets Tone of Political Reform**

*President Roh Moo-hyun Acts as Coordinator by Relinquishing Vested Rights, Including Enabling “Power Organizations” to Act Independently*

In the year since the launch of the Participatory Government, the wall of authoritarianism has been breaking down at a rapid pace. Changes in politics, in particular, can be called a major shift in paradigm.

Gone is the era of an Imperial President who controlled the political parties by using his authority to nominate parliamentary candidates and control money and intelligence as both a carrot and stick. Cheong Wa Dae abolished the posts of senior secretaries in charge of individual ministries and government agencies and reshaped the office into an advisory apparatus for the President. The President even made a visit to the National Assembly as part of efforts to seek greater cooperation. The right of the Prime Minister to recommend candidates for cabinet positions has been guaranteed. The role of the President has been changed so that he is now a coordinator of state affairs rather than a wielder of absolute power.

It would have been impossible for President Roh to eliminate authoritarianism without relinquishing many vested rights. Since taking office, President Roh has guaranteed the independence of the so-called “power organizations,” transformed the arbitrary, closed-door personnel management and made a drastic decision to put his mandate to a vote of confidence.

Even inviting criticism as to why he opted to go along a thorny path rather than take the easy way, President Roh chose to give up his vested rights because he believes that politics cannot be reformed properly without a self-sacrificing resolve.
President Roh’s initiatives culminated in turning the four power organizations—the prosecution, the National Intelligence Service, the National Tax Service and the police—into “agencies that serve” instead of “agencies that dominate.”

During the official briefing session by the Ministry of Justice last year, President Roh said that he had nothing to seek nor anything to gain from the prosecution. Shortly thereafter, the old practice of allowing the Senior Secretary to the President for Civil Affairs to assign incumbent prosecutors to his office was eliminated. In October last year, that same secretary set an unprecedented example by presenting himself to the Legislation and Judiciary Committee while the National Assembly was inspecting state affairs. The presence of the senior secretary broke a long-standing practice. Traditionally, the secretary was immune from being called to the National Assembly because the Prosecutor General, who does go to the National Assembly, closely coordinates with him. This clearly shows that the secretary could no longer call the shots behind the scenes protected by a powerful organization.

As for the National Intelligence Service, the President abolished the routine practice of holding one-on-one meetings with the chief of the intelligence agency to discuss political and other issues of a confidential nature. Now the relevant senior secretaries and aides are generally allowed to be present when the head of the agency makes a report; the contents of the one-on-one reports are limited to sensitive issues related to national interests.

Among government agencies, the National Tax Service is now at the forefront actively revamping administrative affairs, including the abolishment of special tax investigations. The National Police Agency has elevated its public image and status the most since the launch of the Participatory Government.

The only directives President Roh gave to these agencies when some important issue has surfaced were those concerning “law and principle.” As
a result, there is a common perception that these power agencies are now independent from the highest authorities.

In particular, the guaranteed independence of the prosecution has spurred public interest, giving rise to increasing public pressure to systematically wage political reform. The intensifying movement to enhance the transparency of political funds, including the revision of the law, is beginning to break the chain of corrupt collusion and privileges between business and politics.

**Misconceptions About President Roh’s “Lack of Authority” Represents Transitional Pain**

The endeavor by President Roh to eliminate authoritarianism by giving up vested rights has invited some misunderstanding. The most common is that “the President has discarded even a minimum of authority.” President Roh believes, however, that the drive to break up the old power order, which is pervasive in all social sectors, must start with his own surroundings and then spread to all other areas.

The President has been trying to dispel such misconceptions by championing “change with stability” since early this year; he notes that such misconceptions stem from the pains of the transition away from the familiar culture of power.

Another example of misunderstanding is the allegations by some media organizations and opposition politicians that the prosecution’s investigation of illegal Presidential campaign funding is biased. This shows their lack of understanding of the independent mechanism of the prosecution.

President Roh is on record making a public apology about the illegal campaign fund regardless of its scope and underlying reason. He is prepared to spell out his position regarding the matter in due course but at this time the prosecution investigation is still under way.
As for the controversy about possible bias in the prosecution investigation, President Roh has reiterated many times that he has not issued any directive or applied any pressure on the prosecution. As indicated by various opinion polls showing that a majority of people supports the prosecution investigation, such a controversy is unwarranted.