This is the fourth in a series of articles on the performance of President Roh Moo-hyun’s administration since its inauguration on Feb. 25, 2003. - ED.

By Michael Breen

Hands up if you can explain who’s accused of giving what to whom in the current political scandal.

For most readers, such stories soon start to get confusing, and boring. New information is dropped half-digested into the all-politicians-are-corrupt.doc file in the Political Opinions folder. Pretty soon this folder is bulging and you have to be a professional to remember everything that’s in it.

The end of a president’s first year provides a good time to clean the files out and this we do by running the ‘Report Card’ program. My own customized version is based on my son Jonathan’s Year 8 Progress Report at Downlands Community School in the U.K. I find that, with such a rational approach, I am less likely to come up with the usual twaddle that passes for political opinion _ Bush is a fascist, Blair is a plonker, Roh’s a pinko, etc.

The Jonnie Report provides a score from 1 for ‘excellent’ to 4 for ‘unacceptable’ in the following categories: effort, behavior, organization for lessons, and quality of homework, and an overall Attainment from A for ‘very high standard’ to D for ‘unacceptable’.

Subjects include English, Math, Art and Design, French and German and so on, but, of course, we need to adjust that bit. The Jonnie Report for a Korean president’s first year are: Overall Economic Performance, Labor, Foreign Investment Climate, North Korea, Standing Up To America, Being Nice To China, Furthering Democracy, Undermining Opposition Parties, and Not Saying Stupid Things. Optional subjects which he chose for this year are: Making Korea A Hub, Decentralization and Moving The Capital To Daejeon, Promoting Internet Media, and Cloning.

Space doesn’t allow us to go into each category, so I will make a few general comments.

For most subjects, Mr. Roh gets a 2 for effort. In other words, ‘work usually shows a pleasing level of effort and care.”

The exception is for Foreign Investment, in which he scores a 1 for his initiative to create a new body, InvestKorea, and hire a foreigner, Alan Timblick, to head it. By hiring a foreigner, he’s taken the bold first step in a two-step strategy: after ‘foreign,” the next objective is ‘investment.” Stretch goal for next year: Mr. Roh must be careful to watch that his people do not blame Mr. Timblick if, for macro reasons, investment is slow in coming.

The ‘organization of lessons’ scores are also good. To remind, this is a mark indicating self-organization skills. The teacher has to ask herself whether this pupil always, usually, sometimes, or rarely ‘brings correct books, equipment and materials, including homework” to class. Of past presidents, Kim Dae-jung excelled in this area, and even brought a notebook with him to make extra-curricular observations. His predecessor, Kim Young-sam, was notoriously
dense in this regard, always forgetting his satchel. Mr. Roh gets a 2 for all subjects.

But being well organized doesn’t mean you’ve done your homework. You might just be trying to impress the teacher, or, in this case, civic groups. In Making Korea A Hub, Mr. Roh gets a 1 for homework because, in fact, until now it’s been all research and planning. He also gets a 1 in Cloning because he not only knows what cloning is about, which is more than most of us, but he knows enough to have been actively encouraging it.

But clearly, homework is not being done in some of the most important presidential subjects, most notably Standing Up To America, Undermining Opposition Parties, and Not Saying Stupid Things. In these subjects, he gets a 4 for homework. Especially disappointing is the failure to undermine the opposition. In fact, the party he ran for, the Millennium Democratic Party is, as we speak, studying ways to push for his impeachment.

Finally, in class behavior, Mr. Roh scores 2s and 3s. But, the pupil should note, that these scores are given with the generous consideration that, in the first year, a new president hasn’t got a clue what the job is about, nor how he should behave. We advise Mr. Roh, however, that it is time to stop pinching himself and saying to his wife in public, ‘Honey, I can’t believe we’re really in the Blue House.’” Next year, marking will be stricter.

Now to the Attainment in each subject. Mr. Roh gets an A for Furthering Democracy. His separation of the judiciary from the executive is one of the most important democratic initiatives in recent years. In fact, from the historic perspective, this alone will be remembered as the achievement of 2003.

He also gets an A for Being Nice To China. We’re giving an A, too, for North Korea, but to get the same mark next year, he will need to achieve a stretch goal of continuing progress on the nuclear issue while at the same time drawing attention to North Korea’s human rights abuses.

His other A score is in Cloning. The stretch goal is to reproduce the first Foreign Investor by 2006.

Mr. Roh gets B for Standing Up To America. If he had made it look like sending troops to Iraq were to help Iraqis, rather than to obey America, and if he’d wagged his finger instead of just smiled during the phone call with President Bush, he’d have got an A. But, good effort for creating the debate on this issue between the lick-spittle-kowtow-I-went-to-Harvard-and-my-son-didn’t do-his-military-service and the heroic-strugglers-for-an-independent foreign-policy factions.

He also gets a B for Overall Economic Performance, Labor, Foreign Investment Climate, Making Korea A Hub, Decentralization and Moving The Capital To Taejon, and Promoting Internet Media.

In Undermining Opposition Parties, he gets a disappointing C. He should actually get a D because, the MDP split has actually created a new opposition party, but we think there might be a hidden strategy here.

And, finally, in Not Saying Stupid Things, we have to give him a D. Despite the desire, noted above, to be lenient in the first year, this category is in some ways the most important because, for most voters, it’s the main determinant of whether they think you’re an idiot or not. You can be forgiven for screwing up the economy or taking the country to war, because, you know, crap happens, but moments of flakiness are never forgotten.

Let’s make a real effort in front of the TV cameras next year.

*Michael Breen is a freelance journalist and author of two books on Korea - ‘The Two Koreas’ and The Koreans: Who They Are, What They Want, Where Their Future Lies.’*