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By Wakamiya Yoshibumi

A presidential election will be held in South Korea at the end of next year to choose a successor to Roh Moo Hyun, leader of the Uri Party, who is due to step down in February 2008.

While it is rather early to talk about his replacement, I recently led a Japan National Press Club mission to South Korea to observe the situation and to meet with the leading contenders for the presidency.

First, I went to the national assembly where I met Park Geun Hye, 54, chairwoman of the main opposition Hannara (Grand National Party). She is the daughter of former President Park Chung Hee, whose military regime ruled for nearly 20 years until his assassination by an aide in 1979.

Park has led the opposition party for two years. As a child, she lived in the Blue House, South Korea's presidential office and residence. Her mother was assassinated when Park was 22; five

years later, her father was shot to death.

Perhaps because she has endured such severe trials of life, she has become a self-possessed woman with a graceful demeanor.

However, as the leader of the largest opposition party, she is relentless.

Referring to Roh's three-year administration, Park said scathingly, "It has caused division and discord among the people to spread."

She called Roh's policy of reconciliation with North Korea "a failure," saying he attached greater importance to cooperation between the two Koreas than to maintaining alliances with the United States and Japan.

When her father was in charge, South Korea was locked in an intense standoff with the North. He relied on the backing of the United States and help from Japan to achieve his country's remarkable economic growth.

To the younger Park, the current administration's support of North-South reconciliation and digging into its own dark past must appear to be

the mirror opposite of her father's regime.

It appears that even Park does not intend to return to the old days, however.

In fact, she cites liberal democracy, a market economy and constitutional government as three "national principles" that South Korea must hold on to at any cost. Most of these ideas are incompatible with military dictatorship.

At the same time, they are principles that don't exist in North Korea today. It is not right to ignore such realities and show such eagerness in promoting North-South exchanges alone: I think that is what she wanted to emphasize.

Stuck in the 1970s

"Park is young, but her ideas seem to belong to the 1970s," quipped Chung Dong Young, who was imprisoned during that decade because of his involvement in South Korea's struggle for democracy.

Chung, who until recently held the post of unification minister in the Roh administration, has played a key role in advancing North-South relations. He was elected chairman of the ruling Uri Party on Feb. 18.

Our group met him during the election campaign in Chonju, where eight candidates had gathered to deliver speeches.

Chung described Roh's three years in power as a

time during which "the Korean Peninsula broke away from the Cold War situation." He called this "a Copernican change," one as mind-blowing as the discovery that the Earth revolves around the sun.

In June last year, Chung visited North Korea and met with its reclusive leader Kim Jong Il.

"Since we reached an agreement with General-Secretary Kim in our meeting, I expect a North-South summit to take place by the end of the year," Chung said. "It would be nice if the third Japan-North Korea summit could also be held in this context."

Like the former television newscaster that he is, Chung dropped sound bites worthy of headline news.

Of course, reunification of "the Korean people" is important. But should that goal endanger the South's relationships with its allies—countries that share its values of freedom and democracy?

In fact, many Japanese share Park's skepticism about the way the Roh administration is dealing with the North and treating Japan.

South Korea has severely criticized Japan, which subjected it to colonial rule, over problems of their shared history. In comparison, its treatment of North Korea, its adversary in the Korean War, seems unreasonably lenient.

Japanese and South Koreans share many of the

same perceptions, as the popularity of South Korean television dramas in Japan has shown. But alas, this affinity seems to mean little when it comes to the North Koreans, who share the same blood as the South Koreans.

Can the South really persuade its belligerent confrere to give up its nuclear weapons program?

Kim Geun Tae, a former South Korean health and welfare minister, said in response to that question: "It is Japan and the United States that I find harder to understand."

Kim, 59, a member of the ruling Uri Party, ran against Chung in the election for party leadership. Kim is a hard-core fighter, a dissident who served an even longer prison term than Chung did.

"If South Korea takes the initiative to encourage North Korea to introduce a market economy with the help of the United States and Japan, we expect an administration friendly to Japan and the United States to eventually emerge (in the North).

"In times of terror, one cannot be expected to make a rational choice. Once we give assurances of peace and financial aid, the nuclear problem will also be settled," Kim said.

Chung shares that view. Although it sounds optimistic, they have strong belief that change

will come to North Korea, which in the final analysis, is a society of human beings, like any other.

It appears that next year's presidential election in South Korea will see leaders in both ruling and opposition camps fighting an intense battle of left versus right. Another possibility

The mayor of Seoul, Lee Myung Bak, 64, who has hinted he may run for president, supported by the Hannara Party, thinks differently. We visited him at the city hall.

Lee, too, was imprisoned by the Park regime for his involvement in the anti-Japanese student movement.

Now a business leader—he is the former head of Hyundai Engineering and Construction—Lee seems to have a different mindset from the other presidential hopefuls.

Thanks partly to his success in restoring the flow of the Chonggyecheon river through Seoul, the mayor enjoys high public approval.

"The perceptiveness required of CEOs is also important in running nations," said Lee, with confidence.

He may be exactly the new type of leader needed to bridge a divided nation.

Other factions within the Uri Party support former Prime Minister Goh Kun, 68, who has

many years of administrative experience with few party ties, in the upcoming presidential race.

The move appears to be aimed at winning the support of moderate groups. Still, no one can see what will develop during the campaign.

How will Roh, faced with declining public approval ratings after three years in office, react? We asked to meet with him at the Blue House, but our request was turned down.

"If he met with the Japanese media at this juncture, he would be forced to issue a harsh statement," explained an aide.

Deep-seated distrust between national leaders is bad for everyone in both countries.

I might add that, during our visit, we discovered that interest in our mutual concerns was widespread.

Everywhere we went, people repeatedly asked, "Who's going to succeed Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro?"

Wakamiya Yoshiyumi heads The Asahi Shimbun's editorial board. This article appeared in IHT/Asahi, March 13, 2006. Posted at Japan Focus, March 19, 2005.