Death of a President:
In Memory of Roh Moo-hyun
By Myong-sook Han
In the early morning hours of May 23, former South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun leapt to his death off of a cliff in his hometown village of Bonghwa, plunging the nation and the world into shock. Former Prime Minister Myong-sook Han delivered this eulogy at Roh’s funeral on May 29.

President Roh Moo-hyun, How long the night of anguish. How immense your pain, that you would leave behind your adorable grand daughter, with whom you would bicycle through the rice paddy fields of Bonghwa.

Mr. President, How lonely you must have felt. How distressful the burden of the age, that you would venture that forlorn path at the break of day.

It was an unusually splendid day in May, a day you departed from a life-long struggle for “principle and common sense,” for “reform and unity,” a day when our aspirations were left without a home, a day with nothing but heartrending despair and excruciating grief.

In your youth you nurtured your dreams in the hills of Bonghwa. You lifted yourself from the shackles of stifling poverty, and through exceptional focus and wisdom, you turned the impossible into the possible. You avidly embraced trials and frustrations as you sought to make your dreams come true. The greater the challenge, the stronger your resolve. Every accomplishment you made came with still greater humility.

With tender heart, and iron conscience, as a defender of human rights, you led the charge during a brutal age of oppression. Your rage against injustice and yearning for justice molded you into a warrior of democracy in the crucible of June 1987.

Becoming the honored “Star of the Public Hearing in the National Assembly” was destiny in the making. “I object!” you said, to the formation of a grand conservative coalition that merged the three old parties against the will of the voters. Thus was presaged the politics of “principle and common sense,” of “reform and unity.”

The price of honoring “principle and common sense” was harsh indeed, even treacherous. Repeated electoral defeats threw you into the murk. Yet you refused to choose the easy way out.

“Nosamo (Love for Roh Association)” and “The Piggy Bank of Hope” were true offspring of “Dumb Roh’s” political revolution.

President Roh Moo-hyun, You were always ahead of the times, not by one, but by two, three steps. But the world we live in lingered forever by your heels.

You refused to bend to distortions and smears. You refused to give up, and you refused to jump in haste. You always set your vision afar, and held steadfast as you trod the path of history.
You gave up your own power to transform the culture of power politics, a culture that so tarnished our land with foul play and perks.
To build a future of reconciliation and unity, you strived to allay the grievances of those who suffered at the hands of the state, and did not hesitate to make amends to history.
It was during your presidency that the ordinary Korean people were the president of the Republic of Korea.
Through policies to promote balanced growth, decentralization of power, and well-spread development, you sowed the dream-carrying seeds of a warm and compassionate society.
Your economic policies have been unwavering, and have helped to usher in a record-high stock price index of 3,000, 250 billion dollars of foreign reserves, 600 billion dollars in trade volume and 20,000 dollars in per capita income.
You crossed the military demarcation line on foot and heightened the promise of peace on the Korean peninsula.
And with your balanced diplomacy, we saw one of our own citizens elected as Secretary General of the United Nations.
As the foremost computer-savvy president in the world, you helped shape Korea into an Internet powerhouse and a global leader of the digital age.
You ushered in a cultural renaissance, where creativity and expression flourished, where new horizons of the imagination unfolded, and where the Korean wave flowed not only to Asia but also to Africa, and beyond.
How ironic it is, that only through your departure do we find joy in looking back at the five years of your presidency.
It was just fifteen months ago that you left the Blue House with a small but fresh dream.
You carried home a precious hope, a hope of becoming a farmer that cultivates a thriving rural society, a hope of becoming an enlightened citizen that pioneers a “future of progress.”
As you gazed into the twinkling eyes of children who came to visit Bonghwa village with their parents, you pondered again and again over what it is you could do for their future.
But bitter times and rough periods simply would not allow even such modest dreams to come true.
You were endlessly tough on yourself, yet so inexorably open to the pain of others.
We deplore our own failure to come to your side, even when we came across your words, “You, my lovely people, must now abandon me.”
We continued to believe that you could still fulfill your final dream of returning to a humble life of childhood hope living in your hometown.
Alas, what has happened?
Alas, how could this be?
The world has deprived you of even that last shred of hope To lead a simple “human” life.
In your final words, you wrote that you could “neither read nor write.”
You recently wrote, “I think it is right at this time for me to write the story of failure.”
These words leave us even more sorry and ashamed.

Mr. President,
You did not fail.
Even if there were failure, as you say, you may now cast away your worries.
We will now take up your path, take up your dreams, and realize the dream of Korea.
You will forever remain The President in the hearts of all our people.

President Roh Moo-hyun,
We will seek atonement by letting you rest.
As you make your final journey, may you leave all your worldly troubles behind, and soar into the heavens.

Mr. President,
We are so sorry.
We love you. We were happy.
May you rest in peace.

Myong-sook Han is former Prime Minister of South Korea.