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In South Korea, it's the mouse that roars
New breed of politician taps the country's love affair with high tech

By Geoffrey York

SEOUL -- The winning candidate in last week's South Korean presidential election had little need for mass rallies or traditional campaign tactics.

When Roh Moo-hyun's organizers wanted supporters to vote on Election Day, they simply pressed a few computer keys. Text messages flashed to the cellphones of almost 800,000 people, urging them to go to the polls.

During his campaign, millions of voters absorbed Mr. Roh's message from Internet sites that featured video clips of the candidate and audio broadcasts by disc jockeys and rock stars. Half a million visitors logged on to his main Web site every day to donate money or obtain campaign updates. More than 7,000 voters a day sent him e-mails with policy ideas. Internet chat groups buzzed with debate on the election.

South Koreans call it "digital democracy" and "e-politics," and they have become the world's leaders in cyberspace campaigning. Their high-tech boom has unleashed a new form of grassroots participation by millions of "Netizens" who exploit the latest information technology to bypass the once-dominant party machines of the old system.

With the world's highest penetration of high-speed and mobile Internet services, South Korea is at the cutting edge of technology that is transforming the political system, making it more open and democratic. It could be a preview of the shape of Western democracy.

"It's a revolutionary change, and the catalyst of this change is the Internet," said Huh Houunna, director of Internet campaigning for Mr. Roh, 56, a once-obscure human-rights lawyer who emerged as the unexpected winner of last week's presidential election.

Almost half of South Korean voters are below the age of 40, a prime demographic for users of the Internet and cell phones. Until this year, many were apathetic politically, put off by the country's traditional political machinery. But Mr. Roh reached out to voters with one of the world's most sophisticated Internet campaigns, and the vast majority of the younger population voted for him.

Until a year ago, Mr. Roh was best known for his repeated failures to be elected to parliament. Self-educated, he came from a poor family and had been jailed for helping dissidents fight the military regimes of the past. But young voters admired the lawyer for

his integrity and his image as an independent outsider, and they formed an Internet fan club to promote his future.

The fan club, with 70,000 members, helped launch what has been called "the Roh typhoon." Its energetic activism was crucial to Mr. Roh's triumph in last spring's primaries, when he shocked most observers by capturing the presidential nomination of the ruling party. And it was a crucial factor in his narrow victory last week.

"It was like a fan club for a movie star," said Sonn Hochul, a political scientist at Sogang University in Seoul. "The Roh phenomenon was based on the Internet. It's a new form of political participation, and it has educated young people about politics. This was an Internet election."

The Internet allowed Mr. Roh to liberate himself from "black money" -- corporate donations that are South Korea's traditional form of campaign financing. Largely through Internet-based campaign groups, Mr. Roh raised the equivalent of about $1-billion from more than 180,000 individual donors.

Although Mr. Roh mastered the Internet, other major political parties used it and other forms of mass communication, too. The parties held an average of only three rallies a day, compared with 49 a day during the 1997 campaign. Campaigning with loudspeakers on the streets is much less common.

The political element is part of a decade-long technological revolution in South Korea, where more than half of all homes are plugged into high-speed broadband Internet connections – the highest rate in the world. (In most Western countries, less than 10 per cent of households have broadband connections.)

About 25 million of South Korea's 48 million people are regular Internet surfers. All across Seoul, high-rise towers and corporate headquarters are emblazoned with their Web-site addresses in huge letters or neon signs. About 30 million South Koreans have cell phones, and 10 million of these cell phones have Internet connections -- again, a world-leading number.

The broadband revolution began with teenagers. The most popular video games here are on-line, played simultaneously with hundreds or thousands of gamers. These require broadband connections, and companies soon responded to the demand.

Since most South Koreans live in densely populated urban high-rises, it was relatively easy to do the wiring.

The Internet has become the most popular way of organizing street rallies, political and otherwise -- including that of the estimated seven million South Koreans who swarmed into the streets after the stunning success of their national soccer team in last summer's World Cup.

More recently, Internet activists mobilized massive anti-American protests across the country after two girls were accidentally killed by U.S. troops.

Not all South Koreans are happy about the dramatic rise of the Internet. Critics say that the on-line games create "zombie" teenagers who do not know how to interact with the real world.

An estimated 5 per cent to 15 per cent of Internet users are addicted to the Internet.

In one notorious case, a 24-year-old man died in an Internet café after playing computer games nonstop for 86 hours.

During the election campaign, regulators shut down some Internet sites for spreading false rumours, conducting illegal polls, or other violations of election rules.

The newly elected Mr. Roh, however, is promising to use the Internet to make the government more open and transparent.