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Court tells Roh, hands off Seoul

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SEOUL -- South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun took office as if he were an old-time sheriff ready to clean up the town, only to take his reforms one step further -- he tried to move the town.

Seoul has been a capital and center of power since long before the creation of South Korea in 1948.

Last week, the nation's Constitutional Court ruled that the capital will stay right where it is, stunning Mr. Roh's administration and members of his ruling Uri Party, who wanted to move the capital south.

"It was a big surprise to us," said Lee Choon-hee, deputy chief of the administration's Capital Relocation Task Force, which has halted its work. "We didn't expect the court decision."

It was a smarting blow for Mr. Roh, who campaigned in 2002 on an aggressive reform agenda that included lofty goals of cleaning up corruption in the government and solving the North Korean nuclear issue.

Moving the capital city south would help break up Seoul's power circles and enhance people's participation in democracy, his administration had argued.

The plan also would have placed the southwestern part of the country on a more even footing with the southeast, which has nearly double the population and arguably double the political influence.

Administrative offices would have been moved to Gongju, a small city about 100 miles south of Seoul in South Chungcheong province, with construction spanning more than two decades.

But after opponents filed suit, eight of nine justices ruled that the move would require a public referendum and a constitutional amendment, voiding a law passed by the National Assembly last December to set the move in motion.

Although the South Korean Constitution doesn't designate Seoul as the country's capital, the court found that Seoul is customarily considered the capital. Seoul has been the capital of Korea for more than 600 years.

Although South Korea is about the size of Indiana, it has distinctive ideologies and attitudes embedded from different regions of the country.

Mr. Roh, 58, comes from Gimhae, a small town in the southwestern part of the country, and prides himself on his rural roots.

The benefits of the move were multiple, according to the government. More than 40 percent of the country's population is concentrated in the Seoul metropolitan area, causing a noticeable development gap with the rest of the country.

But quick planning and the high expense -- at some estimates, higher than the government figure of \$45 billion -- sparked opposition.

Uri and opposition Grand National Party lawmakers along with Mr. Roh's administration said after the ruling that they still will pursue developing the rest of the country.

"Despite the court's ruling that the special law on the new administrative capital is unconstitutional, the government will push for balanced regional development," Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hun-jai said yesterday.

If the administration had been "more systematic perhaps in the way they were trying to convince the public that this is good and necessary," it might have garnered more public support, said Chun S. Moon, program officer for the Asia Foundation in Seoul.

Photos taken after the decision showed City Hall workers applauding the court's decision, and Seoul Mayor Lee Myung-bak, a vocal opponent to the plan, lauded the ruling.

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