On October 26, in the 89th year of his life, the former President of South Korea Roh Tae-woo passed away, leaving an ambivalent mark in the history of South Korea. He was, on the one hand, Chun Doo-hwan’s first associate in the 1979 military coup, later convicted of corruption and other crimes; on the other, the first president who was elected through democratic elections and began building relations with the North.

Roh Tae-woo was born on December 4, 1932, in the family of an official in what is now Daegu. On December 12, 1979, Roh Tae-woo helped his classmate and a fellow student at the military academy Chun Doo-hwan seize power. When Chun took office as President in 1980, Roh became the number 2 man in the junta government. He held the posts of presidential security adviser, sports minister (he prepared and supervised Seoul’s hosting of the 1988 Summer Olympics), interior minister, member of the National Assembly, and head of the then ruling Democratic Justice Party.

In 1987, when Chun Doo-hwan decided to extend his power, which caused a crisis, amid widespread demonstrations in Seoul and other major cities, Roh Tae-woo announced the beginning of democratic reforms in the June 29 Declaration.

The former President was credited with establishing the country’s current Constitution with direct elections for five
years without the right for re-election, improvement of inter-Korean relations, and the successful Seoul 1988 Summer Olympics. Moreover, in 1989, guided by Nordpolitik, Roh Tae-woo established diplomatic relations with Hungary and later with several Eastern European countries. Diplomatic relations were established with the USSR in 1990 and with China in 1992.

Thanks to his successful policy towards the North, the two Koreas held their first-ever Prime Ministerial talks in 1990. In 1991, they simultaneously joined the UN and concluded the Inter-Korean Basic Agreement, which established the principle of non-aggression between the parties. Experts say the agreement continues to provide a framework for cross-border exchanges and cooperation.

In an apparent attempt to shed his military image, Roh began his administration under the slogan of ushering in an “era of ordinary people.” The Roh administration has actively promoted large-scale infrastructure projects, including constructing a high-speed railway connecting Seoul and Busan, Incheon International Airport, and 2 million apartments. Roh sought to overcome the country’s problems through gradual reforms, but the ruling party’s defeat in parliamentary elections severely clipped his wings two months after his inauguration. To increase its influence, the ruling party teamed up with two opposition parties in 1990. Still, the partners, including the next president, Kim Young-sam, siphoned off influence. A lame-duck period began in the middle of his term, leading Roh to be nicknamed “Mul (Water) Tae-woo,” implying his administration had no color and taste.

In 1993, at the end of his tenure, he was accused of corruption. In 1995, he was arrested and charged with high treason for his involvement in suppressing the 1980 Gwangju Democratization Movement, which, according to official conservatives, killed more than 200 people and injured another 1,800. He was also accused of setting up a secret fund of 450 billion won ($390 million).

In August 1996, Roh Tae-woo was sentenced to 22 years in prison, later commuted to 17 years, and a fine of 262 billion won ($223 million) in April 1997. But as early as late 1997, Roh was granted amnesty by President Kim Dae-jung and belatedly paid his fines in full in 2013 under pressure from the Park Geun-hye administration.

Roh Dae-Woo spent his last years in his home, hardly ever appearing anywhere for health reasons. It is alleged that Roh’s children repeatedly apologized to the victims of the Gwangju Uprising on his behalf. It must be admitted, while Roh was competent, he did not make loud statements of remorse. In a memoir published in 2011, he even provoked anger among Gwangju citizens by claiming that false rumors misled pro-democracy protesters to cause such a tragic incident.

It is clear that in the political heritage of such a person, everyone picks what they like to pick, and every prominent politician has tried to speak out about it.

President Moon’s position was far from immediate. The head of state noted that the deceased had achieved foreign policy successes. Still, he had tainted himself with involvement in the military coup and the brutal suppression of the democratic movement. The former president made many historical mistakes, but there are also achievements, such as the successful hosting of the 1988 Olympic Games, the launching of the Nordpolitik, and the adoption of the Inter-Korean Basic Agreement.

Lee Jae-myung, the Democratic Party’s presidential candidate, initially declined to comment on Roh’s death, apparently mindful of the public’s mixed feelings toward him, but then expressed his condolences.

Lesser politicians have been freer with their words. Gwangju-based party members issued a separate statement against Roh’s state funeral and burial at the National Cemetery, highlighting the criminal charges he was found guilty of.

The leading right-wing presidential candidate and former attorney general Yoon Seok-yeol singled out Roh Nordpolitik as his main achievement. At the same time, second-placed challenger Hong Joon-pyo added the anti-crime initiative.

The leader of the centrist People’s Party and presidential candidate Ahn Cheol-soo told reporters that “the deceased embraced both the glory and the shame of South Korea’s turbulent modern history, in particular by starting and fulfilling his Nordpolitik mission.”

Former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, who under Roh served as Director-General for North American Affairs, North America Division of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, and was among the members of the South Korean delegation responsible for dealing with the North, paid tribute to the deceased for his post-Cold War
diplomacy and policy toward North Korea.

Under Roh, Seoul and Washington made the first amendment to the US-South Korea Status of Forces Agreement which governs the legal status of the 28,500 US troops stationed in the southern part of the Korean Peninsula. Whereas previously, the South Korean side had no authority to charge US soldiers accused of violent crimes (murder, rape, drug-related crimes, etc.), since 1991, South Korea has been able to charge and detain perpetrators.

The US State Department has expressed its “deepest condolences to the people of the Republic of Korea.” “While former President Roh leaves a complicated legacy, his tenure included solidification of the ROK’s democratic tradition, its entry into the United Nations, and a strong commitment to the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.”

The question of how and where to bury the former president was quite sensitive. On the one hand, there is a state funeral, under which the government pays for maintaining the memorial altar to Roh and the farewell and funeral ceremonies. During the memorial period, all public institutions and houses are encouraged to fly the national flag.

On the other hand, Roh is not eligible for burial in the National Cemetery because he was convicted of crimes, including corruption and sedition, and served time in prison before being pardoned in 1997. In this context, Oh Gi-hyoung, a DP lawmaker, even stated, “If the Republic of Korea holds a state funeral for a main culprit of mutiny, it will be self-denial of the Republic of Korea.”

But in the end, Prime Minister Kim Boo-kyum released the decision on the state funeral on October 27, saying Roh had made a significant contribution to the country’s development as president. Kim Boo-kyum added that Article 2 of the Heads of State Act provides state funerals for the country’s presidents, both those who have died in office and those who have retired. The law does not specify whether state funerals are possible in cases of a grave crime, including a military coup.

However, the city of Gwangju said it would not lower the flag or erect a memorial altar in honor of Roh during the state funeral for the sake of its citizens and those who died in the May 18 uprising.

The head of the small left-wing Justice Party, Yeo Yeong-gug also said that “holding a state funeral for those who overthrew the state is an act of overthrowing the political system of the Republic of Korea, stating that the sovereignty of the country belongs to the people, and all power comes from the people.”

Numerous petitions have been posted on the Blue House website calling for the abolition of state funerals using taxpayers’ money. Roh’s body was in the funeral home, where a memorial altar was set up for a while. In just five days, about 2,000 mourners visited the funeral home to pay their tribute. Many former and current government officials and members of the national assembly visited the altar, including former Prime Ministers Lee Hong-Koo, Hwang Kyo-ahn, Ahn Cheol-soo, and Lee Jun-seok, the leader of the People Power Party.

Moon did not visit the altar as he went on a nine-day trip to Europe for the G20 summit and the UN Climate Change Conference. This is important because previously sitting presidents paid their respects during the remembrance period of their deceased predecessors.

On October 30, South Korea said goodbye to the late president. Several hundred activists held rallies in front of the park to protest the state funeral, calling the government’s decision a cowardly act. But there were no clashes between them and the police.

At the moment of finishing this text, the government has not yet announced where Roh will be buried. Still, according to family wishes, it will likely be on Unification Hill in the border town of Paju - this tourist and natural attraction was conceived under Roh as part of efforts to promote peace with North Korea.

To summarize, the author agrees with the thesis of a newspaper article: “Historians underscore the need to go beyond the simple dichotomy of good and evil if a society wants to see the bigger picture. The same must apply to Roh’s legacy.” However, he is left with two rhetorical questions.

First, to what extent is the government’s measured decision related to political wisdom rather than political conjuncture, with Moon trying not to exacerbate the situation near the end of his term - unlike, for example, the story of General Paik Sun-yup’s funeral.

Secondly, if one were to compare the guilt and sentences of Roh Tae-woo and Park Geun-hye, some hypocrisy is evident. The coup d’état participant got three years less than the shaman’s friend with the preposterous charges.
Konstantin Asmolov, PhD in History, leading research fellow at the Center for Korean Studies of the Institute of the Far East at the Russian Academy of Sciences, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.