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House Ethics Panel in Gridlock

Democrats Refuse to Participate Under New GOP Rules

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The House, facing new controversy about the travel of Majority Leader Tom DeLay and other lawmakers, was left last night with no mechanism for investigating improper behavior by its members when Democrats shut down the ethics committee by refusing to accept Republican rules changes that restrict the panel's power.

Democrats said they do not plan to allow the ethics committee to organize until Republicans repeal a series of rule changes they pushed through in January, making it more difficult to initiate an investigation unless at least one Republican member supports the probe.

The committee met in secret for 2 1/2 hours. It was the first meeting since House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) replaced the chairman and two other members with lawmakers more loyal to the leadership. "These rules undermine the ability of the committee to do its job," Rep. Alan B. Mollohan (W.Va.), the panel's top Democrat, said in an interview after a 5 to 5 vote that stalemated action. "An ethics committee has to do a good job if it's going to do any job at all."

The standoff followed a Washington Post report that DeLay accepted a trip to South Korea in 2001 from a group that had registered as a foreign agent. House rules prohibit members from taking gifts from such groups. The ethics committee has admonished DeLay three times in the past year for official misconduct, and some ethics experts believe that the latest revelation could trigger another investigation.

Justice Department documents show that the Korea-U.S. Exchange Council, a business-financed entity, registered under the Foreign Agents Registration Act on Aug. 22, 2001. DeLay; his wife, Christine; and two other Republican lawmakers departed on a trip financed by the group on Aug. 25 of that year.

At least seven other House members, from both parties, took the trips. Yesterday, former secretary of state Henry A. Kissinger resigned from the board of the group. A Kissinger aide said he had not known about the registration as an agent of a foreign government or political party.

The exchange council, founded in 2001 under the charities section of the tax code, is largely funded by a South Korean holding company -- Hanwha Group -- and has another prominent board member in Edward J. Feulner, president of the Heritage Foundation.

Sources familiar with the operations of the exchange council said yesterday that the group apparently did not need to file under the Foreign Agents Registration Act and is exploring how to rescind its registration so that lawmakers would be free to accept its trips. Such a move might also mitigate the

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potential ethical issues for the lawmakers from both parties who have accepted trips to Korea over the past four years, the sources said.

The council said in a statement that it is "examining whether such registration was ever appropriate for an organization like KORUSEC."

"Members of Congress were assured by KORUSEC that these exchanges met with the approval of the [ethics committee], as we believed to be the case," the statement said. "We regret if we were in error and are moving with dispatch to take the necessary corrective action."

The 10-member House ethics panel, formally the Committee on Standards of Official Conduct, is unique among committees in that it is split evenly between Republicans and Democrats. Democrats are resisting rule changes the House made in January that make it more difficult to open investigations. Until January, a tie meant that an inquiry was automatically triggered, now a majority must approve it.

House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) said her party is backing a resolution to "overturn what the Republicans did on that opening day and to make the ethics process indeed bipartisan again."

In a clear reference to DeLay, Pelosi said at her weekly news conference: "In order for whatever accommodation they wanted to make for whoever they wanted to make it, there is no ethics process under the rules that they have put forth."

Pelosi, who has an aide who accepted a trip from the exchange group last fall, said the committee should look into DeLay's handling of the matter but made no mention of her aide.

"This will be a challenge to this new order or lack of order in the ethics committee," she said. The committee "has had a coup launched against it where they removed the chairman and took out two Republican members of the committee, replacing them with people who have already contributed thousands of dollars to Mr. DeLay's defense fund. Is this ethics committee capable of reviewing matters regarding Mr. DeLay that are now in the public domain?"

Ron Bonjean, communications director for House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.), said it was unclear last night how the logjam could be broken. "Democrats have chosen to shut down the ethics process," he said. "It's up to the House Democrats to put the ethics process above partisan politics."

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