

South Korea's Legislative Election: What Went Wrong for the PPP?

Saturday 20 April 2024, by [POPE Kyle](#) (Date first published: 11 April 2024).

The leadup to the election saw President Yoon Suk-yeol embroiled in a series of damaging incidents. His party paid the price.

The South Korean electorate [delivered a crushing blow](#) to President Yoon Suk-yeol and the ruling conservative People Power Party (PPP) in the April 10 legislative election. Voters were ostensibly voting for a local candidate in the 254 district races, and for a party on a separate ballot for the 46 proportional representation seats that together constitute the 300-member National Assembly in South Korea's unicameral system. However, the election was in truth a referendum on the president.

The verdict from the voting public was a resounding rejection of Yoon, making it difficult for him to implement any part of his agenda that requires parliamentary approval.

The election was a landslide victory for the liberal opposition bloc, led by the Democratic Party (DP), which swept the majority of the country's district races, securing 175 seats. The sudden rise of former Justice Minister [Cho Kuk's Rebuilding Korea Party](#) - founded just over a month before the election - also boosted the overall liberal bloc's total. The RKP won 12 seats in the proportional representation ballot. Together, the liberal opposition parties have secured the supermajority needed to fast track legislation and circumvent the filibuster.

For the conservatives, predictable victories in their regional base in the southeast of the country provided the platform to at least avoid following below 100 seats. There was also a smattering of races that swung their way elsewhere. Notably, conservative Lee Jun-seok, the ousted former leader of the PPP who broke away to found the New Reform Party, [secured his first term as a lawmaker](#).

With regards to the president, Yoon is relegated to lame duck status less than half way through his term. He faces the prospect of an emboldened opposition pushing for a special investigations into the numerous allegations of misconduct surrounding his wife, and potential pressure to withdraw from his party.

Yoon came into office in 2022 by a historically narrow margin of victory and has been hamstrung by a National Assembly dominated by the opposition in his first two years in power. The election results have killed any hope of a change in that dynamic. Yoon's term will be [the first time in South Korea's democratic era](#) that the president's party will at no point in their single five-year term hold a parliamentary majority.

Not long ago, the PPP's electoral outlook was more positive and the retaking of the National Assembly was in their sights. Polling suggested that the DP's infighting and the unpopularity of party leader Lee Jae-myung would yield a favorable outcome for the PPP. However, a series of political miscalculations, the emergence of an old enemy on the eve of the election, and public

discontent over the cost-of-living crisis resulted in the perfect storm.

The first signs of trouble came with Yoon's self-inflicted disaster in the October 2023 by-elections. Yoon granted a presidential pardon to Kim Tae-woo, the ousted ward chief of Seoul's Gangseo district. Kim was now free to run in a by-election triggered by his own conviction for disclosing sensitive information on government matters. Voters were outraged by the seeming impropriety and [handed Kim a heavy defeat](#).

Still, with a new party leader - former prosecutor Han Dong-hoon - at the helm, the PPP looked forward optimistically. The leadup to the parliamentary election, however, saw Yoon embroiled in a series of damaging incidents. In January 2024, video evidence emerged of First Lady Kim Keon-hee [accepting a Dior handbag](#) as a gift. It was one scandal too far for a figure with a checkered past.

In February the public's ire was again provoked by the revelation that Yoon appointed [former Defense Minister Lee Jong-sup](#) as South Korea's ambassador to Australia while Lee was under a flight ban as part of an investigation into evidence tampering related to the death of a marine. The political fallout from this incident could have been limited if Yoon had acted swiftly, but instead he refused to bow to public pressure and the issue stayed in the headlines until Lee's resignation on March 29.

The death blow to Yoon's party's electoral hopes came on March 18 with a [visit to a supermarket](#). A planned trip to a large grocery store in southern Seoul should have been an opportunity for the president to show his concern about South Korea's [runaway inflation on agricultural products](#). But Yoon's comment that 875 Korean won was a very reasonable price for green onions, while the suspiciously heavily discounted item was closer to 4000 won the day before, decisively shifted public sentiment against the president.

The opposition latched on to the incident and portrayed Yoon as dismissive of the voters' daily struggles. This message found fertile ground in the economic context of Yoon's agenda of slashing public spending while granting tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy, which resulted in [record tax shortfalls](#).

This has provided the backdrop for Yoon to come across as both incompetent and uncaring. A heavy-handed approach to criticism from the media and a lack of negotiating tact has deepened public distrust.

The deadlock between president and parliament is now set to continue until the 2027 presidential election.

Kyle Pope

P.S.

- The Diplomat. April 11, 2024:
<https://thediplomat.com/2024/04/south-koreas-legislative-election-what-went-wrong-for-the-ppp/>
- Kyle Pope is a lecturer at Joongbu University and Korea Policy Analyst at Future Risk.
- Consider supporting The Diplomat's independent journalism with a subscription.

Subscribe today to continue having full access to our extensive coverage of the Asia-Pacific.
<https://thediplomat.com/subscriptions>