

South Korea: First Female President or Return of Dictator's Daughter? Presidential Election and the Radical Left

Thursday 20 December 2012, by [WON Youngsu](#) (Date first published: 20 December 2012).

Contents

- [Competition among the left](#)
- [The general election and \(...\)](#)
- [Aftermath of the general \(...\)](#)
- [Presidential election](#)
- [Radical left's campaign](#)
- [Conclusion](#)

On the night of December 19, the whole nation was waiting for the final result of the presidential election; at midnight Park Geun-hye was declared winner, with 15.75 million votes or 51.5%. Her opponent from the main opposition United Democratic Party (UDP), Moon Jae-in, won 14.67 million votes or 48.80%. Park Geun-hye is daughter of former military dictator Park Chung-hee (1961-1979) and was the candidate of the ruling Sae-nu-ri party (Sae-nu-ri means a new world). She narrowly led the polls throughout the campaign.

Moon's party and the many people who remember the tyranny of Park's regime had expected Park's defeat. Especially since another dark horse candidate, Ahn Cheol-soo, supported Moon against Park in the final days of the campaign. Ahn was quite popular among people for his clean image and as a successful entrepreneur of his anti-virus programming firm, but he gave up his candidacy for Moon just before the formal registration for presidency. The gap was narrow — 1.08 million votes or 3.6% — but it was bigger than had been expected.

Competition among the left

Behind the two leading candidates, some radical or left-wing candidates also competed for the presidency, though there was almost nil chances of them winning. While Lee Jeong-hee was the candidate of the United Progressive Party (UPP), a successor merger party of the Democratic Labour Party (DLP), Kim So-yeon represented the radical wing of the trade unions and part of the radical social movements. Kim Soon-ja also ran as an independent. At the last general election, in May, she was the number one MP candidate on the proportional list of the Progressive New Party (PNP), a leftwing split from the DLP, but his time she had no support from her party.

Just before the official registration, Shim Sang-jeong, another female candidate of the Progressive Justice Party, the latest split from UJP, gave up her candidacy to support Moon and the UDP. And just a couple of days before the ballot, Lee Jeong-hee, UPP candidate, retreated from the campaign for Moon's victory and regime change, though her decision was not welcomed by Moon Jae-in and his party. Thus, the election turned into the fierce battle between big two: Park Geun-hye versus

Moon Jae-in. In a sense, a proxy war between Park Chung-hee, military dictator, versus Noh Moo-hyun, human rights fighter.

On the whole, South Korean politics looks quite chaotic and complicated, rendering it impossible to forecast what will come, even after the victory of Park. But in order to understand the deeper dynamics of this huge complexity, we need to look back at the past couple of years, which witnessed lots of ups and downs, turns and changes, not just for the mainstream parties and institutional politics, but also for progressive and radical parties and movements.

The general election and internal dispute within radical politics

The ruling party had been expected to lose the general election in May because of the unpopularity of President Lee Myeong-bak and his anti-people, pro-capital policies, but when Park Geun-hye emerged as party leader, the situation changed, and the opposition United Democratic Party suffered a painful defeat. This paved the way for Moon Jae-in, out of power since the end of the Noh Moo-hyun government. Moon was chief secretary of President Noh, whose suicide shocked the whole nation just before being prosecuted for his wife's bribery.

However, something much more interesting was the internal strife with United Progressive Party (UPP) before, during and after the election. The UPP won 12 seats, six from direct election and six from the proportional list, which was not bad. However, throughout the course of the election, the party suffered from internal disputes over the unilateral hegemony and manoeuvring of the majority wing, mostly the successor group of the DLP against the other minority factions — such as liberal wing from the People's Participation Party, a pro-Noh, Moo-hyun split from the UDP, and a small splinter from PNP, a moderate faction within PNP that joined the merger of so-called progressive parties and formed the UPP.

The majority wing of the UPP, the pro-North Korea tendency of the DLP, overwhelmingly dominated the party and filled the list of candidates with its faction members, alienating other tendencies, rank and file party members and causing doubts and suspicions over party democracy. In the course of electing candidates, the majority used illegal and unjust means like rigged ballots and other technical manipulations. In one district of Seoul, Lee Jeong-hee, a young party leader who had a great chance of being elected, had to resign as a candidate because of illegal practices. This was a catastrophe for the UPP, but it survived.

A serious criticism of the UPP came from the left, inside and outside of the party. The UPP chose to align with the neoliberal UDP in a common electoral front. Historically, the relationship with the UDP or liberals had been the most keen over the issues of strategy and tactics of the movement. The building of the DLP was an expression of political independence from liberalism. But the UPP's turn to an alliance with the UDP was regarded as a political and historic retreat and surrender to liberalism, despite of its gradual shift to reformism.

In short, the politics of the pro-North Korea factions dominated the party and party democracy, and the radicalism of the movement's politics as a whole, not just UPP's, were put in danger.

Aftermath of the general election

Just after the election, the UPP was driven into chaotic turmoil. The investigation committee's final report was rejected by the majority faction, and in dealing with the election fraud, party meetings turned into a battleground with physical violence between the majority and minority factions. People

inside and outside of the party were shocked at first with the widespread fraud, and later, by the ferocious process of dealing with the issues.

Thus, the UPP was driven into deep crisis, as the majority faction refused to discipline those party members responsible for fraud, and blocked any moves for discipline at any level, even when violence was used against party leaders who belonged to minority factions. Technically, the party was under the leadership of the so-called “renovators”, minority factions, but the resistance and obstruction from the majority tendency drove the party into disfunction. To the public’s eyes, the political credibility of the UPP was gone for good: it was a de facto political death sentence for the progressive party.

All these processes were televised, and in August the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), South Korea’s main trade union federation, withheld its support. In September, when it proved impossible to resolve the crisis and reform the party, the minority factions resigned from the UPP, forming a new party, the Progressive Justice Party (PJP), with seven parliamentarians.

The UPP was a total failure as a merger of all the progressive forces, though it had excluded the PNP which was having a long process of discussions over the issue of the merger. Part of the PNP and other radical groups were opposed to forming a merged party in that that right-ward shift meant inclusion of neoliberals and electoral alliances with the liberals UDP.

Thus, in the general election, radical politics in South Korea was shattered into pieces. The majority UPP was rejected by the masses other than pro-North Korea hard-core factionists, and the other radical forces now only existed as small splinter parties, like the PJP and PNP, and radical left grouplets. In the midst of there terrible crises and disputes, each faction had to face the presidential election. In the eyes of rank and file workers, progressive politics was a total failure in terms of the historic project of building working-class power.

Presidential election

From early September, the three-way competition between Park, Moon and Ahn was getting hotter and hotter. The results of opinion polling was changing at every turn of events. In the early stages, Ahn looked prominent because as a single-opposition candidate he could win over Park Geun-hye. But after the official inauguration of his campaign, he had to face various difficulties and personal slanders, and at the last moment he gave up his candidacy despite of huge protests from his ardent supporters. Ironically, the defeat of the UDP in the general election paved the way for Moon Jae-in’s candidacy and Ahn’s resignation gave him the status of a unified opposition candidate.

Just a week before the presidential vote, the race between Park and Moon was getting chaotic, even though the international news media predicted an easy victory for Park. Thus far she had been leading the race, but after TV debates and Ahn’s support for Moon, the final result of the election was unknown until final day of balloting.

There were minor left candidates. Lee Jeong-hee of UPP ran to save a party in crisis. She wanted an alliance with Moon, but the UDP and Moon refused to ally with the UPP because of its corruption and its refusal to apologise for illegalities. In the TV debates, Lee attacked Park Geun-hye and won some popularity, but finally she gave up the campaign for Moon’s victory. The success of her attempt to save her party remains to be seen, but it doesn’t look bright.

The Progressive New Party that had not been invited to the merger process of the UPP failed to win any seats in the parliament, and has also been faced with crisis. Thus, it decided not to run a

presidential candidate on its own, but to work with other radical groups outside the party and form a broad electoral front of the radical left. It formed a roundtable for a joint presidential election campaign that would represent the interests of the working class and other popular sectors. However, in the course of negotiations, a tendency manoeuvred to change party policy and run the PNP's own candidate. However, the PNP was divided and the motion for party's candidacy failed in the national committee of the PNP. Part of that faction split from the party and persuaded Kim Soon-ja, a cleaning worker, to be a presidential candidate. She had to resign the party and ran as an independent candidate, with support from a small sect.

Radical left's campaign

Following the general election and the terminal crisis of the UPP, radical left activists in the trade unions, social movements and political groups began to discuss the possibility of intervening in the presidential election as a united radical left force. They formed a nation-wide network with rank and file groups and activists, and formed an alliance with the PNP. In October, though quite late, Kim So-yeon, a female militant, was elected as a workers' candidate by a national assembly of activists. Her major slogan is no to redundancy dismissals and no to casualisation. As an anti-capitalist candidate, this campaign by Kim So-yeon and the radical left signified a huge step forward for radical left politics. Many leftists who had refused to get involved in electoral politics were now working as a united force. Huge sums of money were collected for the campaign, including for the absurd registration fee of US\$300,000, and other campaign costs more.

In the course of her campaign, Kim and her campaigners faced police obstruction. While campaigning at the Gangjeong naval base construction site on Jeju Island and at her final weekend rally in downtown Seoul, she was violently assaulted by police.

The final vote for Kim So-yeon was about 10,000, a poor result, but for her and campaigners the number of votes didn't matter.

Conclusion

The election of Park Geun-hye is a victory for the status quo. The expectation for a liberal victory was big, but the final result will not be that much different. Ironically, Park Geun-hye benefitted from the ongoing economic depression and global crisis, as Moon Jae-in and his welfare populism was not regarded as a viable alternative to Park Geun-hye's reactionary neoliberalism with a populist and feminist face.

The crisis goes on. So does the class struggle.

On the left, amid the crisis of the trade union movement and progressive politics, the radical left worked together to represent the interests of the working and popular classes under the banner of anti-capitalism. Also, the campaign's focus was on active solidarity with sit-in workers on the high-rise towers demanding jobs against redundancy.

After the presidential election, movements and politics in South Korea will face huge changes, splits and mergers. In spite of difficulties and hardship, on the basis of a nation-wide joint campaign for working-class militancy, there will be some opportunities to rebuild a genuine working-class party with a socialist orientation, as well as revitalising labour movement and mass struggles.

Lotta continua against the Park Geun-hye regime and capitalism, locally and globally.

Young-su Won

Independent socialist activist & editor of the *Tahrir Publisher*
