

South Korea holds general elections amid Covid-19 crisis — Another impeachment and the collapse of the conservative opposition

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South Korea held its 21st general election to elect MPs on April 15. The final result was pretty decisive: the ruling Together Democratic Party (TDP) won an absolute majority of 163 seats on the constituency ballot, plus another 17 seats on the party list ballot, for a total of 180 seats in the 300-member parliament.

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In contrast, the main opposition United Future Party (UFP), a new party formed out of a merger of various parties including that of former president Park Geun-hye who was impeached in 2017, won 84 constituency seats and 19 party list seats for a total of 103 seats. This represented a huge defeat for the UFP, and led to party leader Hwang Gyo-ahn resigning even before the final vote was published.

Though the COVID-19 crisis is not yet over in South Korea, the general election went ahead. The result has paved the way for a new stage in politics and follows on from the historic 2016/17 candlelight movement to impeach Park. In the 2016 general election, held prior to Park's impeachment, her Saenuri Party (SP) evaded being crushed and maintained its presence in the parliament even after Moon Jae-in's election as president in May 2017. However, this election result represents another impeachment verdict on the corrupt conservative opposition.

High turnout despite COVID-19

The COVID-19 crisis first hit South Korea in February, when the number of confirmed patients began to skyrocket. A semi-war-like situation against the coronavirus ensued, leading some to expect the postponement of the elections. However, by late March, the virus was under control.

Almost 30 million people participated in the vote. This represented a turnout rate of 66.8% - a rise of 8.2 percentage points on the last elections and the highest since the 1992 general election. Due to the COVID-19 crisis, 26.29% of voters cast their ballots during pre-polling on April 10-11. Though they have to wait in a long queue, young voters participated in large numbers in pre-polling.

Whether the high turnout benefited the ruling or opposition party more is still in debate, but it is clear that, given the exceptional crisis situation, people viewed the elections as being of great importance and therefore turned out in large numbers.

Fiasco of new electoral system

Since his election as president in 2017, Moon has attempted to implement a full-scale political reform. However, faced with resistance from the conservative opposition, the road to this election was tough.

A revision of the electoral system was introduced in 2019, with the 2020 election being the first to use the new mixed-member proportional system (MMPS). The aim of the reform was to better reflect people's diverse opinions by increasing party representation and giving small parties a chance to get into parliament.

The new system was therefore favourable to minority parties, which had high hopes of entering parliament and developing fresh politics. However, the UFP was stubbornly opposed to this because it felt it would be the most likely to lose seats to newer small parties that would benefit from more allotment of seats via the party list.

The UFP responded by setting up a satellite proportional party list with a similar name (Future Korea Party). The ruling TDP was forced to follow suit, organising its own satellite party (Together Citizen Party) so as not to lose seats. The seemingly innovative election law thus became the old same rule under a new guise.

In the end the ruling and opposition parties won most of the seats. The newly-improvised satellite parties won most of the mixed proportional party list seats, while smaller parties missed out on their chance to win more seats in parliament.

Result of the General Election, April 15, 2020

| Party | Constituency seats | Party list seats | Total seats |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|
| Together Democratic Party | 163 | | 180 |
| Together Citizen Party | | 17 | |
| United Future Party | 84 | | 103 |
| Future Korea Party | | 19 | |
| Justice Party | 1 | 5 | 6 |
| Non-affiliated | 5 | | 5 |
| People's Party | | 3 | 3 |
| Open Democratic Party | 3 | | 3 |
| Total | 253 | 47 | 300 |

Huge defeat for opposition

Since the election of Moon's government, the opposition SP (now UFP) had fiercely fought the new government on almost every issue in an attempt to discredit its liberal reform agenda.

Forces outside of SP, especially the extra-parliamentary, extreme right-wing opposition Taegeuggi (National Flag), had a strong influence on SP's inner-party politics and helped shift it towards the extreme right. Some former SP MPs began to claim that the government was being controlled by non-existent pro-North Korea Communists.

SP leader Hwang Gyi-ahn, a pious Christian, led the party into the abyss. In this election, he appealed to voters to give them a majority to prevent Moon's dictatorship. Unrealistic illusion dominated SP's discourse and, despite internal infighting and splits, they remained blind and deaf to any criticism.

Their ridiculous propaganda somehow worked in the Yeongnam region, where the UFP won an absolute majority in Daegu and in a neighbouring province. However, elsewhere, especially in Seoul and the Metropolitan region, it suffered huge defeats. In Seoul and Incheon, UFP won a mere 8 seats and 1 seat, respectively, while TDP won 41 and 11 seats. In Gyeonggi province, UFP won 7 seats, while TDP won 51 seats.

In the course of candidate selection and campaigning, the UFP faced all sorts of problems as it ceaselessly attacked rival parties. Just before the ballot, it had to stand down two candidates. The UFP reform faction was powerless all throughout the campaign. In a sense, the UFP's defeat represents a kind of near political suicide, proving that any renovation of South Korean conservatism continues to remain an elusive prospect.

Overwhelming triumph, but...

It is obvious that the governing TDP won a tremendous victory. One hundred and eighty seats is the most the party has ever won. However, their victory was not achieved on the basis of their own achievements over the past two years or its vision for the future. Rather it rested on the neverending errors and mistakes of its conservative opposition.

The first year of the Moon government registered progress in terms of the United States-North Korea talks and some symbolic reform gestures. However, since its second year in power, the government has been on the defensive due to the economic downturn and the collapse of dialogue talks.

In 2019, a series of mismanagement crises, including Moon's naming of Cho Gook as minister of justice despite being embroiled in various scandals, have undermined the government's credibility.

In sum, Moon was lucky.

Justice Party: High hopes dashed

The progressive Justice Party (JP) won just 6 seats, failing to increase its representation in parliament. Their hope for forming a parliamentary negotiation group with 20 or more seats was completely crushed.

In the course of revising the electoral law, JP had insisted on introducing the new MMP system. However it placed too much expectation on the new system. Mathematically, the party enjoys about 10% support. However, at the level of constituencies, it has almost no local support base and it made little efforts to strengthen the party base locally.

Two of its former MPs, Roh Hoe-chan and Sim Sang-jung had won their seats with implicit support

from TDP. Roh committed suicide in 2018 after revelations of his involvement in bribery. Since then, the party has been under the sole leadership of Sim and become a highly personalised party. This meant the JP's party list was manipulated to ensure no one could challenge her for the leadership. Experienced activists and party cadres were blocked from the standing in winnable positions. Instead, the party list was mainly a showcase for the party's affirmative action for minorities, such as women, youth, disabled people, among others.

JP's organisational weakness meant its campaign was highly dependent on the party's headquarters. Constituency party branches exist mostly in name only, or are at best a loose network of local members.

JP made little effort to link up with organised labour or social movements, believing the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) has no other options but to support JP as the sole representative of workers' interest.

The Minjung Party (People's Party), which was formed in the wake of the dissolution of the United Progressive Party in 2014, completely collapsed in this election. It seems any attempt to revive UPP as a meaningful force is out of the question. The Labor Party, a left-wing split off from JP, won less than 1% of the party list vote and made no attempt to run in any constituency. Thus, except for JP, progressive politics was almost non-existent in these elections.

Conclusion

In a sense, an era of radical working-class politics is over, except for the meagre existence of the JP, which has become heavily institutionalised and far removed from trade unions and social movements.

Most media reports and polls indicate that the Moon government's successful containment of the COVID-19 crisis paved the way for its overwhelming victory. However, this success depended much more on people's sacrifice and voluntary cooperation, than government policy and leadership.

Even with an absolute majority, the ruling TDP is not likely to meet the needs of workers and popular forces. This was made very clear in the government's hesitation to extend the basic disaster allowance to all.

Sooner or later, change will become inevitable. South Korea's politics will take another step, for better or worse. More than 20 years of radical politics has ended in total failure at this election. A new start for the left will have to be put on the agenda in the very near future.

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P.S.

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