

# **Candle Light to Be Rekindled in South Korea with the Oppressed People's Power**

Wednesday 27 April 2022, by [YAMANAKA Karen](#) (Date first published: 27 April 2022).

**In the South Korean presidential election conducted on March 9, Yun Seok-yeol of the conservative opposition party "People Power Party (PPP)" won over Lee Jae-myung of the progressive ruling party "Democratic Party of Korea (DPK)" by a narrow margin of 240,000 votes. The vote percentages for the candidates were 48.56% and 47.83% respectively.**

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There was a growing demand for a political change in the latter part of the political term of the incumbent Moon Jae-in regime. But Yun Seok-yeol's proposal has not attracted support from centrists (39.5%) and nonpartisans (7.5%). In the election, Lee Jae-myung's popularity rating (38%) could not exceed Moon Jae-in's (43%) although the two candidates belong to the same ruling party DPK [1].

## **Fourth regime change since 1988**

In the past presidential elections, the approval rating of the next president has exceeded that of the incumbent president. This means that Lee Jae-myung could not solidify the support of Moon Jae-in's supporters. South Korean voters were concerned about rising house prices, stagnant economic growth, and youth unemployment. And the turnout of the presidential election was 77.1% which was almost the same as the former one (77.2%). But the results of the election will be far from reform and progress they expected. In this election, both candidates repeated fierce negative campaigns against each other, which symbolized the serious division between conservative and progressive in South Korea.

Although Yun Seok-yeol has won the election, he will be faced with the harsh parliamentary operation after his inauguration on May 10 as Yun Seok-yeol will not be able to run the government without the cooperation of the opposition party DPK which has the majority of 172 seat of the total 300. At present, not only the Prime Minister but also cabinet ministers cannot be nominated only by the seats (110) of the ruling party PPP to which Yun Seok-yeol belongs. And revision of a law cannot be made only by PPP. Then law amendments listed in the election pledges will not be able to be made only by PPP.

Moreover, unified local elections will be conducted on June 1. Yun Seok-yeol's leadership will be extremely unstable in the upcoming political events. This is the fourth regime change since June 29 Declaration of 1987. And it highlighted a serious division of Korean society. Far from being united by reconciliation, conflicts have arisen in almost all areas, both internal and external. Internal and

external conflicts have created further social divisions, while the ruling system preceded by violence against workers remains.

### Internal conflict

Conflicts between conservative and progressive is pushing Yun Seok-yeol's leadership into a volatile situation. And many other social conflicts cast a dark shadow on Korean society; among genders, regions, and generations. As if to symbolize those conflicts, Yun Seok-yeol made many inappropriate remarks in this election campaign. Regarding President Chun Doo-hwan who slaughtered demonstrators in the 1980 Gwangju Uprising, Yun Seok-yeol said Chun Doo-hwan was "politically superior." Also, he blamed low fertility rate of South Korea for the rise of feminism while claiming abolition of Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (MGEF) [2].

Such inappropriate remarks were made against the background of historical and irreconcilable conflicts. After all, many South Korean voters allowed the next government to trample on the fundamental human rights and to lose respect for legal and administrative women's rights. So far, the women's movements in South Korea have been virtually concentrated in Seoul and there was a difference in gender perception between the metropolitan area and other areas. However, it was confirmed that the conflicts between the conventional areas [3] was slightly alleviated. At present, the regionalism cannot be explained only by the conventional conflict structure between conservative and progressive. While regional friction was slightly alleviated, friction between men and women culminated a few years ago on the outbreak of feminist movement triggered by #MeeToo against repeated sexual harassment cases in the society.

The division between the rich and the poor is still serious. As the movie "Parasite" depicts, South Korea is a super-disparate society with a large gap between the rich and the poor. The per capita national income in 2021 is USD 35,168, while the selling price of condominiums in the capital Seoul in 2021 is about USD 1 million. House prices in Seoul have nearly doubled in the last four years. Seoul is said to be the most difficult city to have a house of one's own. While the life of the poor family living in the "semi-underground" house depicted in the movie "Parasite" has not improved at all, conglomerates which is known in South Korea as chaebols have been overwhelming winners even after the financial crisis and have destroyed the reform or progress forces of the population. And the Korean economy is still oligopolized by chaebols such as Samsung. Chaebols account for about 80% of the market capitalization of the South Korea stock market. On the other hand, medium-sized and smaller companies create about 90% of jobs in the labor market. In such an extraordinary economic structure, it has been common for chaebols to destroy non-chaebol companies with the power of capital. Family-run chaebols are now out of control by politics.

### External conflict

While internal conflicts are driving Korean society into divisions, external conflicts with neighboring countries such and North Korea and Japan remain unresolved, which has deepened further divisions. In particular, relations between North and South Korea, which seemed to have improved in 2018, are still in a state of division and far from unification. *Rodong Sinmun* (the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea) reported the result of the presidential election in just one sentence the following day [4]. This is in contrast to Moon Jae-in's presidential election. During the presidential election five years ago, *Rodong Sinmun* made a full report on the election with commentaries. North Korea is wary of the outcome of the election which changed the regime from centre-left to conservative.

During the election, Yun Seok-yeol reiterated the typical claims of the South Korean conservative forces on diplomatic and security commitments. It is even more robust than those of the Lee Myung-bak regime, which replaced the progressive regime that lasted for 10 years. Lee Myung-bak clarified a step-by-step policy on North Korea's nuclear issue and continued to operate the Kaesong Public Corporation even when a Korean Navy patrol boat was sunk, and the bombardment of Yeonpyeong Island killed people by North Korea. In comparison, Yun Seok-yeol's policy toward North Korea is extremely tough and does not allow dialogue. He aims to develop technology to launch a preemptive attack on North Korea. It cannot be expected that North-South Korea relations will precede US-North Korea relations for the time being.

On the other hand, Russia's invasion of Ukraine once again made North Korea aware of the need to strengthen its defence capabilities [5]. After 2018, North Korea had selected "conflict" instead of reconciliation with South Korea. And Kim Jong-un is accelerating dictatorship on the "confrontation" line and threatening the international community with nuclear missiles. It will be inevitable that North Korea will accelerate development of nuclear missiles with Yun Seok-yeol's hard-line policy.

### **To abolish the system to suppress the working class**

At present, Korean society is divided due to various conflicts internally and externally. Whether or not each conflicting level can move toward integration through reconciliation is a serious issue for Korean society. In addition, Confucian thought still persistent stubbornly in Korean society has complicated the conflicts in Korean society. The negative heritage of the past feudal society, which contradicts democracy, has been an obstacle to reconciliation between men and women or between generations. Many feminists let some air into the staunchly conservative country but the impact on the society as a whole is still limited. Return to conservative politics in this presidential election will inevitably deepen the sharp division of the society.

However, there is not just bad news. A non-regular worker candidate with a socialism policy declared his candidacy in the election. This is a big step forward in the sense that it has become possible to talk about "socialism" in public in Korean society considering the past times when it was virtually impossible to include "socialism" in the party platform for fear of political crackdown by the National Security Act. The political season of Korean society as a whole is not over. And young voters' willingness to reform or progress continues toward the social pathologies that has spread while being intertwined with the culture of Korean society; slavish hierarchical relationship in the society and intensified disparity due to dismantling of the middle class.

Meanwhile, Yun Seok-yeol visited the former President Park Geun-hye's home in Daegu on April 12 and South Korean politics retreated again to the pre-2016 candle light protest era when Park Geun-hye was impeached [6]. The 2016 Park Geun-hye impeachment presented a number of long-term challenges to the Korean working class, but they have not tackled the challenges seriously. From the standpoint of the working class, the candle light "revolution" cannot be called a radical change as long as the ruling system preceded by capital violence against workers continues.

While the 2016 candle process and its outcomes may be called "revolutionary", there are many limitations to define it as a revolution. The reactionary attacks on the working class have remained unchanged towards trade union representatives and have wiped out the workers who claimed their right to work. The working class should once again strongly criticize the conventional false politics and the neoliberal offensive led by "centre-left" politicians who violated basic labor rights. The "centre-left" neoliberals have created non-regular workers, many of whom are women. And the personal and basic rights of most workers are still invisible.

A “nation” that does not guarantee the fundamental rights and only ruins the lives of oppressed people is not the place to live. Rather than such a “nation”, it’s better to omit it. We should abolish the legal system to suppress the working class which has been deviously constructed by neoliberals disguised as “democratic activists” and regain the politics of genuine workers. The 2016 candle light uprising has won a “historical victory”. But democracy was not achieved. The candles remain go out and should be rekindled with the potential of autonomous people’s power.

**Karen Yamanaka (JRCL)**

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## Footnotes

[1] Gallup Korea Research Institute, 2 March, 2022, “Gallup Korea Daily Opinion No.485”. Moon Jae-in is the first president who was not fell into lame duck.

[2] During the election, Yun Seok-yeol took advantage of the backlash against feminism which prevailed in young men and made a campaign promise to “abolish MGEF” to win votes. But many young women strongly opposed it. And many women’s votes flowed to Lee Jae-myung.

[3] Mainly between Gyeongsang Province and Jeolla Province located in the southeast and southwest respectively on the Korean Peninsula. Gyeongsang Province and Jeolla Province have had the long historical conflict. And Gwangju Uprising, which occurred in 1980, made the political confrontational regionalism decisive. Non-conservative forces were overwhelmingly strong in Gwangju City and the surrounding Jeolla Province. Even in the 2012 presidential election, the percentage of votes for non-conservative was about 90% in this region. However, in this presidential election, the approval rating for conservative was over 30%.

[4] *Rodong Sinmun*, 10 March 2022, “20<sup>th</sup> Presidential Election “in South Korea”

[5] Karen Yamanaka, ESSF (article 62033), 17 April 2022, “[North Korea’s ICBM Strategy under the Current Situation of Ukraine](#)”.

[6] Park Geun-hye has actually resumed her political activity, serving as chairperson of the support group for a conservative candidate who is scheduled to run for the next Daegu City Mayor election in June this year. Candlelight impeached Park Geun-hye in 2016. On the other hand, it was many South Koreans themselves who brought Park Geun-hye’s “landslide victory” in 2012.