

South Korean elections return right-wing government

By Ben McGrath
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South Koreans went to the polls on April 11 to choose members for the 19th National Assembly. In an election in which the opposition Democratic Unity Party (DUP) was expected to ride the wave of discontent, the right-wing Saenuri Party retained its majority. The ruling party, formerly known as the Grand National Party, won 152 seats—only one less than at the previous general election.

The DUP picked up 46 new seats to bring its total to 127—well short of the predicted 148 seats. The small United Progressive Party (UPP), mainly trade union-based, picked up 8 seats to move its total to 13, while far-right Liberty Forward Party, led by former GNP figures, lost 13 seats to finish with 5.

The DUP leader Han Myeong-sook resigned immediately after the election.

South Korean media described the result as an unexpected “victory” for the Saenuri Party, especially for its leader Park Geun-hye, who will run in the presidential election later this year. Park is the daughter of former military dictator, Park Chung-hee. In reality, the ruling party retained its majority primarily because workers and youth did not see the Democrats as representing an alternative to the government of President Lee Myung-bak.

The election took place on the eve of North Korea’s failed attempt to launch a satellite. The Saenuri Party exploited the opportunity to stoke fears of a military confrontation. The Lee administration helped fuel the paranoia by threatening to shoot down the rocket and by producing an intelligence report of a possible North Korean nuclear weapon test.

Far from criticising the government’s warmongering and hard-line stance against North Korea, the Democrats remained largely silent on these issues. The DUP and UPP were not prepared to challenge the

Obama administration, which has backed the Lee administration’s aggressive posturing, as part of its own confrontational stance throughout Asia toward China, North Korea’s ally.

After coming to power in 2007, Lee scrapped the “Sunshine Policy” of previous Democrat administrations, which sought to engage with Pyongyang to establish North Korea as a new cheap labour platform. Lee has used his confrontations with North Korea to divert attention from his deeply unpopular economic and social policies that have widened the gap between rich and poor.

The Saenuri Party campaign strategy, designed by its leader Park, rested largely on distancing the party from the Lee administration. She renamed the party and promised to take a more compromising stance toward North Korea, as well as to reform the social welfare system and boost employment. Park declared after the voting: “The NFP [Saenuri Party] has disappointed the people in many ways in the past four years and we believe that you’ve really given us our last chance. We promised new politics.”

The DUP and UPP, which ran joint candidates, attempted to portray themselves as defenders of the poor and working people. They campaigned on populist promises to create a welfare state and to rein in South Korea’s massive conglomerates.

The conservative character of the Democrats was underscored by the support of the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU)—the “yellow” state-run union grouping established by the Park dictatorship in the 1960s. At the beginning of the year, FKTU president Lee Yong-deuk declared that “all the democratic and progressive movements have joined forces with the DUP.”

The UPP, which characterises itself as “left-wing,”

has connections to the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), which was illegal under the military dictatorship and engaged in a series of militant strikes in the 1980s. Since being legalised under Democrat President Kim Dae-jung in the 1990s, the KCTU has played the key role in betraying strikes and protests against the pro-market restructuring of the past decade and a half.

The KCTU's isolation of Ssangyong workers during the protracted occupation of the company's auto plant in Pyeongtaek in 2009 allowed the Lee administration to use the police to crush the protest. More than 2,600 workers were laid off and 96 were jailed. Since the end of the occupation, the KCTU has collaborated even more closely with the government and state apparatus.

The disillusionment with the Democrats and the KCTU was reflected in the election turnout of 54.3 percent—still low, although higher than the previous election. Among young people, the proportion of voters was much lower. According to *Maeil Economic Newspaper*, the turn out for voters in their 20s was only 27 percent, down from 37 percent in 2004. For young women, the figure was just 8 percent.

Young people have been hit particularly hard by rising joblessness and the high cost of tuition produced by the policies of the Democrat administrations of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun. Kim Dae-jung was responsible for implementing the restructuring demands of the International Monetary Fund following the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis.

Kim Dae-jung's restructuring of the country's conglomerates only allowed the larger ones to expand even further at the expense of the weaker ones. In league with the KCTU, his administration effectively destroyed the life-long employment system and opened the way for the wholesale use of low-paid, casual workers. Roh Moon-hyun continued these policies.

From 2001 to 2010, the top five chaebols have increased their sales as a proportion of the South Korean GDP from 59 percent to 70.4 percent. A survey conducted last year by WorkingVoice, an organisation dealing with casual workers, showed that nearly half of all workers were now in casual positions. They are paid about half of their full-time counterparts, while being denied access to basic benefits.

The official youth unemployment rate stands at around 8 percent. But if those who have given up

looking for work are taken into consideration, the unemployment rate is estimated to be more than 20 percent, or more than one million people.

The Democrats' electoral debacle is a product of widespread alienation, especially among workers and youth, from the entire political establishment. Rather than signalling positive support for the right-wing Saenuri Party, the election result points to growing political and social unrest.

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