

South Korea: The general election and leftwing politics

Thursday 1 May 2008, by [WON Youngsu](#) (Date first published: 29 May 2008).

April 30, 2008 — For the South Korean left, the general election of April 9 was another fiasco following the presidential election last December, in which the election of Lee Myung-bak brought forth the return of the conservative government, while Democratic Labor Party (DLP) candidate Kwon Young-gil received just 3 per cent of vote, less than the previous result in 2002 — a drop of 300,000 votes.

The DLP won two constituency seats and three seats from the party list, with 5.6 per cent or 973,345 votes. The DLP's seats were halved compared with the result of the previous election in 2004 of 10 seats, two constituency seats plus eight list seats, respectively. The Progressive New Party, which split from the DLP, won no seats; it obtained 2.94 per cent, less the threshold of 3 per cent. In sum, the two leftwing parties suffered defeats in the election.

Main results of the election

In this election, the ruling Hanara Party won an overwhelming victory of 153 seats in the 299-seat congress. With the votes from other conservative groups, conservative MPs hold more than 200 seats, beyond the line for constitutional reform, while the opposition Unified Democratic Party (UDP) won only 81 seats. In that sense, conservative analysts claim this election is the final punishment for the Roh Moo-hyun government.

Result of the April 9, 2008, general election

Voting rate 46.1 %

Party	Constituency	Party List	Seat
Hannara Party	131	22	153
Unified Democratic Party	66	15	81
Freedom & Advance Party	14	4	18
Pro-Park Solidarity	6	8	14
Democratic Labor Party	2	3	5
Creative Korea Party	1	2	3
Independent	25	0	25
Total	245	54	299

However, the most important fact in the election was the historically low turnout of voters. Only 46 per cent of voters cast their ballots and more than half of voters abstained from voting: 17,389,206 out of 37,795,035 voters. It means the vast majority of people lost hope in electoral politics at all, and the political institutions represent less than half the people. The allegedly ``absolute majority'' of conservatives, in fact, represent the opinion of the minority.

Furthermore, though the Hanara Party won a huge victory, its triumph is rather incomplete. Park Keun-hye led a court rebellion, both inside and outside the party. Her faction won about 40 MPs, and outside the party, Pro-Park Solidarity won 14 seats. This group was composed of pro-Park politicians who failed to win Hanara's candidacy and ran as independent candidates. Thus, President Lee's control over the party is vulnerable to a possible split or internal division.

Former Hanara presidential candidate Lee Hoe-chang's party, the Freedom & Advance Party, succeeded in surviving as a local party dominating the Chungchung area. Another conservative party moves the institutional politics further to the right. Many independent MPs were conservatives. In contrast, the UDP's loss is serious. The Democratic Party lost almost half its seats, down from 152 to 81 seats. And many of its leading figures, including even the party's presidential candidate and party representative, lost their constituency seats. After 10 years of rule, the party not only failed to complete the democratic reforms, but also pursued neoliberal policies, thereby destroying its own support base among the middle and lower classes.

Progressive forces

The DLP's loss was expected, but considering the fiasco in the presidential election and the subsequent split of the Progressive New Party, the five seats in the parliament means its survival as a party. However, considering the support from the Korean Federation of Trade Unions (KCTU) leaders and other popular movements, the result was modest. Without the unexpected victory of Kang Ki-gap in Jinju, the party's profile would have been hampered more seriously. And ironically, Kwon Young-gil, the party's presidential candidate, who is mostly responsible for the poor result of the presidential election, saved his constituency seat.

The Progressive New Party failed to enter the parliament. The leaders of PNP, Shim Sang-jung and Roh Hoe-chan, popular former DLP MPs and media stars, lost in the constituency election. And from the party list, the PNP won just 2.94 per cent. Within the party, some members claim a victory and that there is potential, while others are critical toward the leadership's shift to the electoralism.

The extra-parliamentary left groups didn't participate in election, and criticised both the DLP and PNP as reformist parties. However, the leftwing groups outside the DLP are required to take an attitude toward the PNP, which is supposed to be refounded after the election. Especially former KCTU president and former DLP MP Dan Byeong-ho's position is important, because he disaffiliated from the DLP but refused to join PNP, insisting on building a genuine workers' party.

Perspectives

The rearrangement or reconfiguration of politics, as well as progressive politics, is inevitable. The Lee Myung-bak government is going to start its neoliberal offensive on a massive scale, possibly initiating his ambitious, but insane, project of a great canal through the peninsula. But his government will be faced with high expectations and tough resistance from the both sides. And if Lee Myung-bak fails to obtain any tangible economic outcome in a short period, his leadership will be challenged from within his party and outside.

On the other hand, the labour, popular and social movements lost at the presidential and general elections. Thus, under the impact of defeats and splits, the legitimacy of the movements is still in jeopardy. Though the DLP survived narrowly, the leadership and political capacity of the movement will be put to the test. And the PNP will be put to the test of surviving as an independent political force, independently of the majority national liberation current.

And the radical left that has been critical to the DLP will have to make a decision about how to

intervene in the political rearrangement/regroupment of South Korea's leftwing politics. Especially, the leftwing of PNP wants to build a broad left party which is distinct from the DLP, though radical left groups still have some doubt about PNP left's real intention. In any case, the reconfiguration of leftwing politics will be on the agenda in the near future.

On the other hand, the recent congress of the Power of the Working Class, a major radical leftwing group, declared its plan to build a working-class party and elected a new leadership.

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