

South Korean poll dominated by a disgruntled and alienated electorate

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South Koreans go to the polls today to decide on the composition of the next parliament. The short campaign was notable only for the lack of fundamental differences between the major parties and for the dissatisfaction and distrust expressed by voters. According to recent polls, up to 40 percent of voters were undecided over whom to vote for.

The two main parties—President Kim Dae Jung's Millennium Democratic Party (MDP) and the opposition Grand National Party (GNP)—slugged it out for a couple of weeks, trading insults and accusations of corruption. The right wing GNP currently has 129 seats and is forecast to win 120; the MDP has 103 and is hoping to pick up about 110. The remainder of the 273 seats will go to smaller parties.

Whatever the final result it is clear that Kim Dae Jung has failed to attract significant new support for his MDP, refashioned last year in a bid to widen his political base. As commentators are quick to point out, one factor is the continuation of strong regional loyalties—Kim and the MDP have their base in the southwestern Cholla region while the GNP's support is in the richer and more populous southeast.

But the inability of Kim Dae Jung, who built his reputation by opposing the country's military dictatorships, to broaden his influence is more fundamentally bound up with his administration's policies. During his two years in office he has imposed the restructuring demands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that have resulted in a rapid rise in unemployment, deep social polarisation and growing poverty.

With the assistance of the country's trade union federations, Kim Dae Jung was able to push through changes to the country's labour laws, effectively dismantling South Korea's system of lifelong employment. As the administration pressed for the dismantling of the corporate conglomerates or *chaebol*, thousands of workers were thrown out of work and into poverty, as South Korea has little in the way of a welfare system. While the official jobless rate has declined from a high of over 8 percent to 4.6 percent, it is still more than double the level prior to the

Asian financial crisis. Moreover many workers have been forced into jobs that are menial, poorly paid and insecure.

The government has not hesitated to use riot police to break up major strikes and occupations. Just last week more than 8,000 riot police were used to bar striking autoworkers from the southeastern city of Ulsan from staging a protest in Seoul against the sale of the Daewoo Motor Corporation. Workers were hauled out of their cars as they attempted to enter the city and more than 900 were arrested.

During the 1997 presidential elections, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), which earned a reputation for militancy during the strike struggles of the late 1980s, backed Kim Dae Jung. In response to the widespread hostility among workers to the present government, the KCTU has formed its own political party—the Democratic Labor Party (DLP). It will be little more than a pressure group on the existing major parties. Its principal aim is to pacify angry and disgruntled union members who have seen the KCTU leaders repeatedly cave in to the government's demands.

Kim Dae Jung's orientation is underscored by the fact that he was only able to achieve a majority in the previous parliament through a bizarre coalition with the right wing United Liberal Democrats (ULD). The party's leader Kim Jong Pil, who was made prime minister, was the head of the notorious Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) and was responsible for attempting to assassinate Kim Dae Jung in the early 1970s. The ULD broke from the alliance in the leadup to today's poll.

In these conditions, the opposition GNP, the political vehicle developed by the military dictatorship that ruled until the late 1980s, has been able to beat the nationalist drum against the foreign takeover of South Korean corporations and posture as a defender of the poor. Backed by sections of big business hard hit by the Asian economic crisis, the GNP leaders are hostile to the IMF demand for the breakup of the *chaebol*. They argue that Kim Dae Jung's policies have undermined the competitiveness of the South Korea and led to its economic decline.

The ruling MDP has responded with a batch of electoral promises for more jobs and expanded social services. But these are regarded in the press and broad sections of the electorate as a cynical exercise in pork barrelling. An editorial in the *Korea Herald* bluntly spelt out the demands of major sections of the ruling class who are insisting that the IMF's market reforms must continue and was critical of Kim Dae Jung for having not pressed ahead rapidly enough.

“The government and the ruling party should stop pushing such hastily formulated projects to pander to voters ahead of the parliamentary elections,” it warned. “They should, instead, try to reduce people's anxiety about the economy by better preparing for any possible economic crisis that may occur after the elections.”

Kim Dae Jung and the MDP have, of course, exploited the fact that the South Korean economy has expanded by 10 percent over the last year and the decline in the jobless rate. But far from representing a revival of the “Asian miracle,” the growth rate has largely been the result of government spending programs and increased exports, particularly to the US, as a result of the lower value of the won.

Such a recovery is rather unstable. The currency has begun to strengthen against both the US dollar and the Japanese yen, threatening South Korean exports. More fundamentally, however, the country's banking and financial system, which is heavily burdened with bad debts, remains very fragile.

In early March, Lee Young Keun, head of the Financial Supervisory Commission, told businessmen: “Korea will have to go cap in hand to the International Monetary Fund again if domestic banks don't make extensive efforts to restructure themselves but just hope for government support such as the extension of deposit insurance coverage”. His comments were reinforced by US ambassador Stephen Bosworth who stated that the financial sector could face a renewed crisis because of “unwillingness to reform management structure” in domestic firms.

The MDP has also come up with another electoral card. Just three days before the poll, Kim Dae Jung announced that he would meet his North Korean counterpart Kim Jong Il in mid-June for the first ever top level talks between the two countries, which are technically still in a state of war. No peace treaty was ever signed to end the Korean War.

Kim Dae Jung has been under attack from the GNP over his so-called Sunshine Policy towards North Korea. He has sought to use economic incentives to reach a deal with the Stalinist leadership in Pyongyang to end hostilities, open up the North Korean economy to South Korean businessmen and to eventually move towards reunification. GNP leaders have accused Kim Dae Jung of appeasing the north and undermining the security of South Korea.

By holding out the prospect of talks and an eventual

agreement with North Korea, Kim Dae Jung is hoping to appeal to South Korean voters, many of whom have family members in the north and for decades have been unable to visit them. But the meeting has been greeted with a deal of suspicion by opposition leaders and voters who regard the exercise as little more than an electoral ploy.

The clearest expression of the dissatisfaction of voters with all parties has been the influence wielded by an alliance of civic action groups known as the Citizens' Coalition for the General Elections (CCGE). In January the organisation released a blacklist of 66 politicians, who it considered corrupt or not worthy of office. The campaign, carried out largely on the Internet, has attracted considerable interest from voters.

Further fuel for discontent was added last week when the National Election Commission published findings that 16 percent or 184 of the 1,178 candidates standing in the elections have criminal convictions and have spent time in prison. Some were jailed for a range of criminal offenses, including hit and run crashes, fraud, perjury, embezzlement, bribery and also adultery which is still illegal in Korea.

Others, however, were convicted under the country's draconian security laws formulated under previous fiercely anti-communist military dictatorships. It is still illegal in South Korea to advocate support for North Korea or its regime. Many political prisoners spent decades in South Korean jails. Regardless of the rather mixed character of the list, some 300,000 people have visited the NEC's web site to find the information.

In such a volatile political climate, the outcome of today's election may produce some surprises. It is unlikely that any party will achieve an outright majority. Whatever the result, the government will be under considerable pressure to push ahead with the IMF's program of economic restructuring, which will only heighten the social and political tensions.



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