

South Korean presidential election: right-wing candidate poised to win

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18 December 2007

After a more than a decade of so-called “democrats”, the candidate of the right-wing Grand National Party (GNP), Lee Myung-bak, appears poised to win tomorrow’s presidential election in South Korea. The GNP is the party most closely connected to the military dictatorship that dominated the country for much of the post-World War II period until the late 1980s.

Opinion polls have consistently shown Lee with over 40 percent support, or some 25 percent ahead of his two key rivals: the right-wing independent and former GNP chairman, Lee Hoi-chang, and Chung Dong-young, from the United New Democratic Party (UNDP). The UNDP is a breakaway from the Uri Party, which backed the current president Roh Moo-hyun in the 2002 presidential poll. Roh is ineligible for a second term in office and is due to step down in February.

Lee Myung-bak was the former mayor of Seoul and former CEO of Hyundai Construction and Engineering—one arm of the huge Hyundai conglomerate. Earlier this month, he was cleared by South Korean prosecutors of charges involving share manipulation that threatened to derail his candidacy. The scandal is still hovering over the election, however, after Roh ordered a new investigation this week.

If the GNP does win the election tomorrow, it will be primarily because of widespread hostility to Roh, rather than positive support for Lee. Roh has presided over five years of pro-market policies, maintained South Korean troops in Afghanistan, and committed over 3,000 to support the US-led occupation of Iraq.

The rise of the “democrats” followed a series of strikes and protests in the 1980s, which forced the former military regime to make concessions. In the election of 1992, the “democrat” Kim Young-sam defeated the last military-backed president. He was followed in 1997 by Kim Dae-jung who had narrowly escaped assassination in 1973 by the Korea Central Intelligence Agency for his criticisms of the junta.

The so-called democrats championed free market reforms against the “corruption” and monopoly of large conglomerations like Hyundai. But they did not hesitate to use repressive methods to stifle strikes and opposition from workers. In the midst of 1997-98 Asian financial crisis, Kim Dae-jung imposed the IMF-dictated “reforms”, including the effective abolition of South Korea’s life-long employment system.

As the social gulf between rich and poor deepened, hostility to Kim intensified. His successor Roh, a former labour lawyer, only narrowly defeated the GNP candidate in 2002 by riding a wave of

opposition to the US-South Korean alliance and fears that Washington was provoking a new war on the peninsula. Early in 2002 President Bush had branded North Korea as part of an “axis of evil” with Iraq and Iran and escalated tensions over Pyongyang’s nuclear programs. Roh pledged to continue President Kim’s “Sunshine Policy” of easing tensions and opening up North Korea to foreign investors.

Roh’s popularity began to slide almost immediately as he imposed harsher labour laws, deployed police against striking workers and pushed for free trade deals despite widespread opposition. His approval rating plunged even further after he dispatched South Korean troops to boost the US-led occupation of Iraq. The GNP attempted to capitalise on the hostility by moving to impeach Roh on charges of corruption and incompetence. Opposition to Roh, however, did not automatically translate into support for the right-wing GNP and Roh’s Uri Party won a landslide victory in parliamentary elections in 2004.

Support for Roh continued to slide as disillusion and alienation with his pro-business and pro-US policies grew. In 2005, the Uri Party lost its majority in the National Assembly to the GNP. In 2006 regional elections, the party suffered a devastating defeat, winning just one seat and leaving the GNP in control of 13 of the country’s 16 provinces.

In August, Roh loyalists broke from the Uri Party to form the UNDP in a bid to salvage the upcoming presidential election. The UNDP candidate Chung Dong-young was Roh’s former unification minister in 2004-05 and strongly supported reconciliation of the two Koreas. His campaign, however, has been completely compromised by the widespread dissatisfaction towards the Roh administration.

Antiwar sentiment was further fuelled this year by the kidnapping of 23 South Korean missionaries in Afghanistan. Widespread alienation is expressed in the anticipated low turnout rates, especially among young people. Analysts forecast the figure will be far lower than in 2002—already a record low of 70 percent—despite an additional 2.6 million eligible voters, mainly due to the lowering of the voting age from 20 to 19.

The Yonhap news agency commented on December 11: “There are more younger voters this year... but their traditional debating ground of the Internet has been comparatively quiet compared with the election of 2002, when a storm of Internet support for underdog Roh Moo-hyun helped propel him to office.” The reason is obvious: large numbers of young people are hostile to the

UNDP, but have no intention of voting for the GNP and so will abstain.

The disaffection is also expressed in a sharp rise in the number of presidential candidates—12 as compared to just 7 in 2002.

The GNP's candidate Lee Myung-bak has also been seeking to broaden the party's appeal by softening its hard-line stance, particularly towards North Korea. In the 1960s, Lee participated in student protests against the military rule. He earned his nickname of "Bulldozer" through his connections to construction tycoons and real estate speculators but then made a reputation as Seoul's "green" mayor (2002-06) by restoring a small stream in the city.

Lee won the GNP candidacy in August by defeating Park Geun-hye, the daughter of South Korea's dictator Park Chung-hee. As the heirs of the US-backed anti-communist dictatorship that fought the Korean War, the GNP has never recognised North Korea and previously denounced the "Sunshine Policy" as a betrayal. Lee, however, has promised to continue aid to North Korea as long as it completely dismantles its nuclear programs and opens up to the "international community".

Lee has pledged to triple North Korea's per capita income to \$US3,000 within a decade, help North Korea set up 100 export firms each with annual sales over \$3 million, and to train 300,000 skilled workers. He would also donate \$40 billion to Pyongyang as a "cooperation fund" to expand infrastructure in North Korea, including networks of communication and industrial zones. It is no accident that Lee has close connections to Hyundai which has been in the forefront of South Korean businesses seeking to exploit cheap labour opportunities in North Korea.

Lee's stance has provoked opposition within the GNP's ranks. Lee Hoi-chang, who was the GNP's presidential candidate in 1997 and 2002, is running as an independent and a "real conservative". He has called for the scrapping of the "Sunshine Policy", an end to all aid to the North unless it completely dismantles its nuclear programs and has criticised Lee Myung-bak's policies as "ambiguous". Lee Hoi-chang has also called for the strengthening of the US alliance and opposes Roh's plan to dismantle the US-South Korea Combined Forces Command by 2012. The North Korean state press has warned of a "war calamity" if he wins the election.

The GNP and Lee Myung-bak have been aided by the easing of tensions between Washington and Pyongyang this year. Preoccupied with the war in Iraq and an escalating confrontation with Iran, the Bush administration reached a deal with North Korea at six-party talks to dismantle its nuclear programs in return for economic aid and a normalisation of relations. This month Bush sent a letter to North Korean leader Kim Jung-il for the first time. Lee Myung-bak has called for a continuing alliance with the US, but also stressed the importance of close ties with Beijing, now South Korea's largest trading partner.

Sections of big business back Lee's economic policy known as "747 Vision"—to achieve 7 percent annual economic growth, double per capita income to \$40,000 and make South Korea the world's seventh largest economy. He has proposed a massive canal project from Busan to Seoul and promised to boost business investment and end "excessive labour disputes". At the same time, he has made empty expressions of concern over the country's

growing poverty and young unemployment. Joblessness is 8 percent among young people aged 15-29 and 20 percent among recent college graduates.

Lee has been able to capitalise on growing fears of an economic downturn. The Bank of Korea has forecast that economic growth will fall from 4.8 percent this year to just 4.7 percent next year—down from an average of 6.4 percent for the period 2000-2002. With rising oil prices and inflation, South Korea is projected to have a current account deficit of \$3 billion in 2008—the first since the economic crisis of 1997. Far from helping the poor, Lee's 747 program of "reforms" is aimed at imposing the brunt of the crisis on working people.

A *Dong-A Ilbo* editorial on December 11 warned: "The Bank of Korea and the Korean Chamber of Commerce and Industry both emphasise that bold and continuous deregulations measures and improvement in the labour environment are needed to increase facility investment. That is the solution that even the public is aware of. Presidential candidates are advised to come up with practical pledges that will bring about a favourable business environment rather than waste taxpayers' money to curry favour with voters."

Other commentators have expressed concern over rising social discontent. Huh Chan-guk of Korean Economic Research Institute told AFP: "Young people who supported the liberal government in the previous elections feel frustrated. They are now more interested in growth practical issues as they find it harder to get jobs". A recent government survey found that 8 out of 10 Koreans believed social wealth was distributed unfairly. The number of household heads who are jobless and rely on income from other family members had increased to a four-year high of 2.56 million or 15.6 percent of the total.

If Lee Myung-bak does win tomorrow's poll, his administration will rapidly come into conflict with working people as it implements its pro-market policies and continues to support the militarist policies of the US administration.



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