

South Korean elections reveal widespread political disaffection

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Local and municipal elections held in South Korea on October 26 were widely regarded as an important test of public opinion prior to next year's presidential and parliamentary elections. The outcome revealed widespread political alienation, not only from the ruling Grand National Party (GNP) but also the opposition Democratic Party.

The main contest was for the mayor of the capital, Seoul—a city of more than 10 million that accounts for over 20 percent of the country's population. Democratic Party-backed opposition candidate Park Won-soon defeated his GNP opponent Na Kyung-won, by 53.4 to 46.2 percent in an election that many believed would be neck-and-neck.

Potential presidential candidates campaigned actively in the mayoral race. Park Geun-hye, the former GNP chairwoman and daughter of former South Korean dictator Park Jeong-hee, supported Na. She is widely seen as the ruling party's likely candidate in the presidential election next year.

Park Won-soon was backed by the Democrats, various pseudo-left parties, and political newcomer and former IT entrepreneur, Ahn Cheol-soo. Ahn, who was planning to run for mayor, stood aside for Park. Ahn is considered a likely presidential contender and has consistently outpolled potential Democrat presidential candidates. He was widely credited with Park's solid win last week.

Park is nominally an independent, but takes his political orientation from the Democrats. He told the *Hankyoreh* newspaper on October 4: "I will write a new future over the history written by the Democratic

Party with Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun." Kim and Roh were responsible for implementing pro-market policies in the wake of the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis that accelerated the casualisation of workers and saw a significant decline in workers' wages and living standards.

After being elected, Park thanked the Democrats for their support, declaring he had "incurred a big debt" to the party. His first act as mayor was to sign off on a plan by the Democrat-controlled Seoul City Council to offer free school lunches to all elementary school students this year, and to expand the program to all middle school students by 2014.

The school lunch program, which has been promoted by the Democrats to try to boost their support, was a major issue in the campaign. The election followed the resignation of GNP mayor Oh Se-hoon, after the defeat of a referendum on the program that Oh had called in a bid to block the plan. He claimed it was too expensive and had proposed limiting its application by a means test.

The referendum failed to obtain the necessary 33 percent voter turnout to validate the result. Oh's inability to obtain public support in this referendum was seen as a vote of no-confidence. His resignation marked a sharp reversal in the fortunes of the GNP.

Oh had come to power in 2006 by capitalising on the wave of discontent directed at former Democrat president Roh Moo-hyun over economic policy, deepening social inequality and declining living standards.

Likewise, the current GNP president Lee Myung-bak won the 2007 election with his so-called 747 plan—7 percent annual growth, annual per capita income of \$40,000 and making South Korea the world’s seventh largest economy. Support for Lee, a former CEO of Hyundai Engineering and Construction, plummeted after he continued the assault on living standards and workers’ rights following the onset of the global financial crisis in 2008. Wages have decreased or remained stagnant. Instead of a rapidly improving economy, Lee is presiding over economic stagnation. The International Monetary Fund predicts 3.9 percent growth this year, below the government target of 4.5 percent. According to a recent Realmeter poll, Lee’s approval rating has fallen to 32.3 percent, down from 76 percent when he took office in February 2008.

Significantly, however, the loss of support for the GNP has not resulted in gains for the Democratic Party. Its own nominee for Seoul mayor was defeated by the “independent” Park Won-soon in a preliminary vote to decide on a joint opposition candidate. Commenting on the election outcome, Korea University academic Hyun Jae-ho told Reuters: “Most of the votes in this election could be labelled as a vote against the establishment, voicing the need for change in the current politics.”

Another indicator of popular disaffection was the low voter turnout—just 48.6 percent, down from 49.2 percent in 2006—despite the candidacy of Park, who was billed in the media as a left-leaning “independent”.

Both the GNP and Democratic Party are widely viewed as responsible for the deepening gulf between rich and poor. More than a decade after President Kim Dae-jung effectively ended the country’s life-long employment system, nearly 70 percent of workers are irregular, meaning they lack contracts, are subjected to lower wages and face indiscriminate firings.

Working people face rising consumer prices, housing prices, and education and tuition fees. Since 2000, Korea’s food price index shot up by an average of 4.4 percent annually, compared to an average of 2.8 percent for other OECD countries. The price of pork is more than double the average in the major cities of the G7 countries, China, Singapore and Taiwan, the *Chosun*

Ilbo reported on May 11.

Park campaigned not only for free school lunches but also for more apartments to alleviate Seoul’s high rents. He is a civil rights lawyer who helped found the People’s Solidarity for Participatory Democracy, which helped organise protests in 2008 against Lee’s lifting of a ban on US beef imports. Like his defeated GNP rival, however, Park has also promised to slash the Seoul City Council deficit—a sure sign that austerity measures, not populist pledges, will be implemented.

The election result is a pointer to the parliamentary election due next April and the presidential poll to be held in December 2012. According to one analysis, the GNP would lose its current majority in the national assembly, with about 30 seats predicted to fall, if last week’s outcome was replicated in a national parliamentary poll.

The slump in the fortunes of the Democrats makes it more likely that they will turn to “independents” such as Ahn Cheol-soo to lift their chances in next year’s election. These “independents”, however, are just as committed as the GNP and Democratic Party to the defence of corporate interests and thus to the austerity program being implemented internationally to impose the burden of the worsening economy onto working people.



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