

South Korea: Dictator's daughter announces presidential bid

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Park Geun-hye, chairwoman of South Korea's ruling Saenuri Party (New Frontier), last week announced her candidacy for December's presidential election. Park, who was defeated in the party's 2007 primary by President Lee Myeong-bak, is expected to win the nomination in a primary to be held on August 19.

The 60-year-old Park's main political capital is the legacy of her late father, Park Chung-hee, US-backed military dictator who ruled South Korea from 1961 to 1979. The Saenuri Party is hoping to exploit her father's image as a "strongman" to promote illusions that she can revive the economy which has been hard hit by the deepening global financial turmoil.

Speaking with senior journalists at a seminar in Seoul this week, Park defended her father's military coup in 1961 as the "inevitable and best possible choice." She said the coup served as a cornerstone of what South Korea had become today, and that historians and the public would reinterpret it in that way some day.

Park is seeking to revive the fortunes of the Saenuri Party, which under President Lee has lost public support. His five-year term has been marked by broken promises and scandals, culminating in the recent arrest of his brother for taking huge bribes. Lee came to power pledging to boost economic growth and incomes but imposed austerity measures instead.

In her maiden campaign speech last week, Park declared she was a candidate for "change." She promised to abandon Lee's "backward paradigm" on North Korea, and take a more conciliatory approach. Lee scrapped the previous "Sunshine Policy" to open North Korea up to corporate investors, leading to tense standoffs and heightening the danger of war.

Park also pledged to reform social welfare and force big business to "fulfill its social responsibility," including by hiring more young people.

Park's currently leads presidential opinion polls, with around 38 to 42 percent support. This is some 20-percentage points higher than her nearest possible rival—an entrepreneur-turned academic Ahn Cheol-soo, who is expected to run as an independent. Ahn has gained support among young people through his commentaries against social inequality and big business.

Lee Kyu-young, a professor at Sogang University, told the *Financial Times* that Park's "strongest asset" was the lack of any serious alternative candidates. Earlier this year, three other Saenuri Party leaders had announced their intention to run for president, but two pulled out this month, clearing the path for Park.

The opposition Democratic Unity Party (DUP) has been unable to capitalise on the popular hostility towards Lee's government, despite populist appeals denouncing the rich and promises of more social spending (see: "South Korean Democrats make empty populist appeal").

During their two decades of rule from 1993, the Democrats proved to have no fundamental differences with the party derived from the military junta, currently called the Saenuri Party. Successive Democrat administrations were responsible for imposing the burden of the 1997-98 Asian economic crisis onto the backs of working people.

In April's parliamentary elections, the DUP was unable to win a majority of seats in the National Assembly, providing Park a stronger base for her presidential bid.

Sections of the media have pointed to implications for the status of women in Korean society if Park were elected, giving credence to Park's claim to represent "change." The *Korea Times* wrote: "[H]er victory would go down in Korean history as something on a level similar to Barack Obama's election as the first black US president."

In fact, just as Obama has intensified US militarism and the corporate assault on working class conditions, Park will impose the agenda demanded by the South Korean ruling elites. Her emergence as the leading presidential candidate is a warning that more authoritarian forms of rule are being prepared.

The oppressive rule of Park's father lasted for nearly two decades. Under his regime, a tiny layer of businessmen created giant conglomerates, later known as the chaebol, through the exploitation of workers as cheap labour. President Lee himself rose to become the CEO of Hyundai Engineering and Construction in the 1970s because of his connection with Park.

Park established the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA), as well as the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU), to suppress any political opposition, especially by the working class. The FKTU was used to police draconian conditions including seven-day weeks and twelve-hour work shifts. The police and military were repeatedly called to put down strikes and protests, especially in the 1970s, when South Korea was badly hit by worldwide recession.

Park was assassinated in 1979, following a dispute with KCIA chief Kim Jae-kyu over how best to suppress protests in Busan and Masan. After Kim declared that repression of the protests would require the deaths of 3,000 people, Park insisted that, if necessary, the security forces should kill 30,000.

Park's daughter declared in her 2007 autobiography that the 1961 coup was "a revolution to rescue the nation." She commented sympathetically of Japanese colonial rule from 1910 to 1945 saying that it had "modernised" Korea. She denounced the 1948 Jeju uprising against the corrupt US-backed South Korean regime as a "left-wing rebellion" that deserved to be suppressed. She also supported the promotion of new

history textbooks legitimising the US-backed dictator Rhee Syngman during the Korean War, listing him as a "great" national leader.

Park shares her father's hostility to the working class. In her book, she denounced any collective struggle by workers as "self-serving and unreasonable defiance of law." Her current calls for corporate "social responsibility" need to be seen in the light of her previous calls for "Korean Thatcherism"—a society totally subjected to the "free" market. As president, Park would have no qualms in riding roughshod over democratic rights to impose her agenda.

The Saenuri Party website declares: "The Saenuri Party led Korea's dynamic development through innovation, sacrifice, and a sense of duty." One recent such "sacrifice" was Lee's job-sharing policy, which required workers to reduce their wages by up to 30 percent to allow employers to hire unemployed workers at much lower wages.

Far greater sacrifices will inevitably be imposed on workers in the months ahead. The government has just announced a revised economic forecast, down from 3.7 percent to 3.3 percent this year. Exports are sagging in the face of the worsening crisis in Europe and a slowing Chinese economy. The month of June had the lowest job creation in nine months. The official youth unemployment rate has already reached a record high of nearly 8 percent. While the overall unemployment rate is about 3.2 percent, that does not include the millions who have given up looking for work.

Park's political elevation indicates that police state measures will be used to deal with the resistance of the working class to the "sacrifices" ahead.



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