

Daughter of former South Korean dictator wins presidency

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Park Geun-hye of the ruling Saenuri Party emerged as the next South Korean president last night. She edged out her opponent Moon Jae-in of the Democratic United Party (DUP) by 51.6 percent to 48 percent. The voter turnout, at 75.8 percent, while higher than in previous recent elections, reflected widespread alienation, especially among young people, toward the entire political establishment, including the Democrats.

Park's election represents a turn to authoritarian forms of rule by the South Korean corporate elite in preparation for confrontation with the working class. She is the eldest daughter of the late military dictator, Park Chung-hee, who ruled South Korea for most of the 1960s and 1970s. Her father ruthlessly suppressed democratic rights, and all strikes and protests by workers, laying the basis for the rapid growth of the country's conglomerates, the chaebol.

When her mother was killed in 1974 by North Korean agents, Park served as her father's first lady. He was assassinated in 1979 by the head of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency, Kim Jae-gyu, amid a bitter dispute over killing protesters during a wave of labour and student unrest. In 1998, she became a member of the National Assembly.

Park appealed particularly to older Koreans on the basis of misplaced nostalgia about her father, who often is credited by the media and right-wing politicians for turning impoverished Korea into the fourth largest economy in Asia. Speaking to supporters following her victory, Park said it was a victory for "the people's hope" for economic recovery.

In order to appeal to voters, both Park and Moon rhetorically talked about "economic democratisation" to curb the power of the chaebol. The dominant sections of big business threw their weight behind Park. She used her father's slogan "Let's Live Better" which

demands sacrifice from the working class, supposedly for a better life in the future.

Korean Federation of Industries vice-chairman Jung Byung-chul warned in a letter last month that the Korean people must prepare "for a major belt-tightening endeavor." He criticised politicians for "pursuing populist policies to win votes ahead of the presidential election, rather than devoting themselves to overcoming the economic crisis."

Big business judged that Park, who in the past has spoken glowingly about her father "saving the nation" through his 1961 military coup, would not hesitate to unleash police-state repression against the working class to enforce an austerity agenda.

Park appealed to voters to make an historic "change" for "gender equality" by electing Korea's "first woman president." In reality, she represents a new wave of free market restructuring that will widen the gulf between the rich and poor. She has presented herself as the Korean version of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

For the working class, social conditions will continue to worsen. As the South Korean economy slows to an estimated 2.4 percent growth this year, more companies, including GM Korea and telecom giant KT, are slashing jobs. Students are graduating from universities with massive debts, yet one fifth of them are unable to find a job.

The failure of the Democrats to win the presidency reflects a deep crisis in the South Korea's so-called "liberal" camp. Even Moon's mild calls for regulation of the chaebol were deemed unacceptable by the corporate elite. At the same time, Moon was unable to win support among young people, because of widespread disaffection from the DUP.

The DUP and its allies campaigned on a platform

critical of outgoing president Lee Myung-bak, whose approval rating hovered in the 20 percent range. Despite this, they failed again—as they did in April’s national assembly elections—to capitalise on this public hostility, as a result of their own anti-working class policies when in office during the 1990s and early 2000s.

President Kim Dae-jung in particular played a major role in undermining the social position of the working class. He pushed through the demands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) during the Asian financial crisis in 1997-98, ending the life-long employment system in the major corporations and opening the door for low-paid casual labor. Roh Moo-hyun, Kim’s successor, continued these policies, allowing Lee to capitalise on widespread public disgust to come to power in 2007.

Moon’s loss also exposes the bankrupt politics of the DUP’s “left” backers, notably the United Progressive Party (UPP) and the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU). Both pushed for Moon’s election, trying to present him as a “progressive” alternative to the Park. The UPP’s presidential candidate, Lee Jung-hee, briefly made headlines with her condemnations of Park, before bowing out of the race in favor of Moon. The KCTU, which has collaborated with the Lee administration in suppressing strikes, sought to dupe workers into believing that Moon would be more susceptible than Park to working class pressure.

While the election focused primarily on domestic economic policy, looming international issues are sure to play a significant role in Park’s presidency. Both Park and Moon adopted a conciliatory tone toward North Korea, in order to distance themselves from President Lee’s unpopular policy of confrontation. Park, however, maintained a more hard-line stance, compared to Moon, who advocated returning to the “Sunshine Policy” implemented by previous Democrat administrations to seek to open up investment opportunities in the North.

Park’s victory is sure to be welcomed by the Obama administration. It counts South Korea as a key ally in its “pivot” toward Asia to strategically encircle China. However, the South Korean ruling establishment is caught between its military alliance with the US and its massive economic relationship with China. As the business elite developed closer ties with China—already

South Korea’s largest trading partner—politicians like Moon hoped to cultivate that relationship by taking a softer tone toward North Korea, also in the hope of exploiting the North as a cheap labor platform.

The tense situation in North East Asia has been exacerbated by last Sunday’s Japanese election, which returned Shinzo Abe’s right-wing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to office. The LDP campaigned on a nationalist platform that will bring Japan increasingly into conflict with China. With the Korean election out of the way, Park’s new government is free to pursue a foreign policy that is more openly aligned with that of the US.

Park’s election is another indicator that a period of sharp political turmoil within the region, and intensified class battles inside South Korea, has opened up.



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