

South Korean opposition alliance prepares for regional elections

Ben McGrath
28 May 2014

With South Korea's regional elections due on June 4, the opposition New Politics Alliance for Democracy (NPAD) is hoping to capitalize on public anger with the administration of President Park Geun-hye and her ruling Saenuri Party. The main race will be for Seoul mayor, which is seen as a barometer of public opinion in the country as well as a stepping stone for the presidency in 2017.

The NPAD is a new coalition between the Democrat Party (DP) and Ahn Cheol-soo and his supporters that was formed earlier this year. At the party's inauguration ceremony on March 26, Ahn declared, "Today's launch of the New Politics Alliance for Democracy is the beginning of a new system for the future. It is the end of worn-out politics." In reality, the NPAD is nothing more than a cosmetic change and an election vehicle for the Democrats.

In the Seoul mayoral election, incumbent Park Won-soon of the NPAD is being challenged by lawmaker Chung Mong-joon, the former leader of the Saenuri Party's predecessor the Grand National Party. Chung is the son of Chung Ju-yung, founder of the Hyundai chaebol and is currently the largest shareholder of Hyundai Heavy Industries. His brother, Chung Mong-koo, is head of Hyundai Motors.

Park campaigned as an independent before joining the Democrat Party after becoming mayor in a 2011 special election. Park is close to Ahn Cheol-soo and credited Ahn for helping him win the election. The poll was called when the ruling party's Oh Se-hoon stepped down after failing to win a referendum on free school lunches.

Ahn is the former head of Ahn Labs, an anti-virus software company, and a presidential candidate during the 2012 campaign who dropped out to support the Democrats' Moon Jae-in. Prior to the 2011 Seoul mayoral election, Ahn shot to popularity by making limited criticisms of the government and political system. By

posturing as a political outsider, he gained significant support, particularly among young people.

Ahn Cheol-soo is nothing but a political charlatan. A multi-millionaire who struck it rich with Ahn Labs which he founded in 1995, Ahn, along with the Democrats, represents a stratum of the ruling class whose business interests have been blocked by the economic dominance of the chaebol conglomerates. About 30 families like Samsung and Hyundai control nearly all the wealth within South Korea.

Ahn now shares the NPAD leadership with Kim Hangeil, who previously led the DP. Kim stated that "The party launch is the declaration of a long journey toward regime-change in 2017 starting with victory in the June local elections." The merger follows the 2012 general and presidential elections both of which the DP lost despite the fact that outgoing president Lee Myung-bak's support rate hovered in the 20 percent range. Even with backing from Ahn, the trade unions, and parties like the United Progressive Party, which falsely claim to put forward working-class policies, the DP was unable to lift its support.

While the DP postures as the official working-class party in South Korea, it has consistently put forward pro-business policies. The DP first came to power in 1997 when Kim Dae-jung won the presidency. In the midst of the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis, Kim implemented the market restructuring demands of the International Monetary Fund, resulting in privatizations and job losses, as well as an explosion in irregular workers.

The NPAD's election strategy is to exploit public anger over the April 16 sinking of the Sewol ferry. The party and its supporters are placing the blame for the tragedy on Park and her administration. The party's floor leader, Park Yeong-seon declared recently, "Politics exists to improve the people's lives, and for the safety of the people. A government and politics that cannot protect the

people must not exist.”

However, since a similar ferry sinking in 1993, no administration, including those of Kim Dae-jung and his Democrat successor Roh Moo-hyun, has addressed the underlying concerns about safety. The use of temporary workers—12 of the Sewol’s crew members including the captain fall into this category—by companies which provide little or no safety training became the norm under the Democrats.

The DP’s pro-business policies make it harder to posture as the representative of workers. The alliance with Ahn, like previous coalitions including with the United Progressive Party, is an attempt to maintain its pro-labor façade.

The Democrat Party relies on its “legacy” of opposition to the military regimes of Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan. With the election of Park Geun-hye, Park Chung-hee’s daughter, the ruling elite in South Korea signaled an offensive against the working class. Privatization is the priority, following in the footsteps of Kim Dae-jung. The NPAD has made clear that it fully backs this agenda and will carry it out given the chance.

Yun Yeong-gwan, a representative for Ahn’s group, sought to reassure big business, stating of the new coalition, “It is not anti-chaebol nor pro-labor. More importantly, the administration needs to emphasize fair competition in society.” In other words, the pro-business policies of the DP will not be changed one iota with the NPAD.

The NPAD is supported by all of South Korea’s so-called “left”, including the United Progress Party and the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions. These groups bear political responsibility for the attacks carried out on the working class by both major parties. In the end, they are nothing more than extensions of the Democrats; supporters of the profit system who attempt to mask their contempt for the working class with anti-capitalist phrasemongering.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact