

Widespread disaffection in South Korean regional elections

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6 June 2014

In regional elections held in South Korea on Wednesday, the opposition New Politics Alliance for Democracy (NPAD) failed to score a decisive win over the ruling Saenuri Party, despite falling support for President Park Geun-hye.

The election, held every four years, is for nearly 4,000 posts in metropolitan, provincial and local administrative offices. The most closely watched are 17 positions for provincial governors the mayors of major cities with the NPAD taking nine as compared to eight by the Saenuri Party.

The NPAD's most significant victory was for mayor of Seoul, which is viewed as a political indicator for the country's presidential election. The NPAD incumbent Park Won-soon easily defeated his challenger, Chung Mong-joon, a seven-time lawmaker and son of Hyundai founder Chung Ju-yung, by 55.7 to 43.4 percent.

In the other races, the Saenuri Party won the posts of mayor in Daegu, Incheon, Busan, and Ulsan, and governor in the provinces of Gyeonggi, Jeju and North and South Gyeongsang. The NPAD took the positions of mayor in Daejeon, Sejong, and Gwangju and governor in the provinces of North and South Jeolla, North and South Chungcheong, and Gangwon.

The media hailed the rise in the national participation rate to 56.8 percent, the highest turnout since nationwide local elections began in 1995 when it reached 68.4 percent. In fact, the figure was only a marginal increase from 54.5 percent at the 2010 election despite weeks of campaigning to get the vote out.

Not only did many people fail to vote, those who did often did so reluctantly. As one voter told the *Korea Herald*: "I really don't like any of the candidates this year. I watched TV debates to make my decision. I didn't really think any of them had a point in their

arguments. I just voted to prevent the worst."

The opposition party focused its campaign on the Sewol disaster, a ferry that capsized and sank in April off the southern coast killing 304 people, mostly high school students. The tragedy and the government's mishandling of the rescue operation produced a wave of popular anger. Support for President Park plunged sharply in opinion polls from 61 percent to 46 percent—her lowest level since coming to power in February 2013.

Despite falling support for Park, the NPAD continued to lag behind the ruling party. A Gallup Korea poll in late May put the NPAD at just 28 percent compared to more than 40 percent for the Saenuri Party. Some 25 percent of respondents declared that they did not support any party.

The widespread alienation reflects broad hostility to both parties of big business. The Democrat Party (DP)—the NPAD's predecessor—also bears responsibility for contributing to the conditions that led to the Sewol's sinking. The Democrat administrations of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun carried out pro-market restructuring that has undermined safety standards.

The Democrats were responsible for the privatization of public enterprises, mass job losses, and the scrapping of life-long employment that has led to an explosion of low-paid temporary labor. Around 46 percent of all workers are irregular, earning little less than half what their regular co-workers make.

The NPAD was formed in March in a desperate effort to revive the electoral fortunes of the Democrats. It is a coalition of the DP with Ahn Cheol-soo, a wealthy businessman-turned politician, who gained some support, particularly among young people, by posturing as a political outsider and making limited criticisms of

the establishment parties. Ahn dropped out of the 2012 presidential election to support the Democrat candidate (see: “South Korean opposition alliance prepares for regional elections”).

The minor opposition United Progressive Party (UPP) also ran several candidates. Days before the election, however, several of these candidates withdrew from the election and called on their supporters to vote from the NPAD. Baek Hyeong-jong, the UPP’s candidate for governor of Gyeonggi Province, suspended his campaign on June 1, saying, “We have to stop the Saenuri Party candidate from being elected by all means.”

The UPP, which formed an electoral coalition with the Democrats prior to the 2012 General Election, employs anti-capitalist rhetoric to posture as a working class party and draws support from the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU). In fact, it functions as part of the political establishment in diverting the opposition of workers back behind the Democrats and the parliamentary framework.

The KCTU is responsible for a series of betrayals, including the defeat of the occupation by Ssangyong auto workers in 2009 and more recently the strike of railway workers last December. The workers struck over plans by the government to privatize the publicly owned Korea Railroad Corporation (KORAIL).

The NPAD has also postured as an opponent of privatization. Its candidate for Seoul mayor, Park Won-soon, claimed prior to the election, “While the ‘railway industry development plan’ that the current government is pushing is a policy of privatization, what is needed is an above average privatization prevention amendment that cancels the private sales license.” The government issued a sales license to KORAIL in December, approving the sale of a new rail line to a private company.

In other words, Park claims that by choosing opposition candidates who will vote for an “anti-privatization” bill, the working class can prevent the sale of public enterprises like KORAIL. However, the NPAD has no interest in blocking privatization. In December, the party orchestrated a backroom deal with the Saenuri Party and Korean Railway Workers Union, to end the 22-day strike on the terms of the government and management.

The regional elections are one more sign of popular

disaffection with the entire political establishment amid widening social inequality and rising levels of poverty and unemployment.



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