

South Korea's Democrats narrowly defeat ruling conservatives in national election

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The Minjoo Party of Korea (MPK) pulled off a slim victory in Wednesday's South Korean general election, defeating the governing right-wing Saenuri Party of President Park Geun-hye. It was the first time in 16 years that a ruling party, while remaining in office via the presidency, had lost its parliamentary majority.

The MPK—South Korea's Democrats—and its allies campaigned largely by exploiting the anger and fear workers and young people have over poor economic conditions and the labor market restructuring plans pushed by Park's government. However, this agenda will continue to move forward under the Park administration, with the assistance of the MPK.

In the 300-seat National Assembly, the MPK secured 123 seats, edging out the Saenuri Party, which obtained 122 seats—a loss of 30 seats. Two MPK allies, the People's Party and the Justice Party, captured 38 seats and 6 seats respectively. Independents took the remaining 11.

Candidates competed for 253 seats, while 47 were chosen by proportional vote. Running in the election were also smaller parties like the Labor Party, Green Party and the People's Alliance Party. All three have close ties to the MPK and none represent a genuine working class agenda.

After the election, MPK leader Kim Jong-in criticized the Park government with an obvious eye toward next year's presidential election. "The voters delivered their stern judgment on the botched economic policies of the Park Geun-hye government and the Saenuri Party," he said.

Saenuri Party chief Kim Mu-seong said he would resign his leadership post while making perfunctory references to the voters' will: "People rendered their judgment with a harsh stick and we were crushingly defeated. All this happened because (we) forgot the fact

that politics should only work for the people and fear the people."

The results reflect popular discontent with both the main parties that, under various names, have formed successive governments since the end of the military-backed dictatorship in 1987. The People's Party, established by Ahn Cheol-soo in February, consists of defectors from the MPK. It swept North and South Jeolla Provinces and the city of Gwangju, all traditional MPK strongholds. Ahn and his party appealed to people's disaffection toward the two-party system, but in fact represent a more right-wing faction of the Democrats, dissatisfied with even the mild reformist appeals the MPK uses to give itself a liberal veneer.

The People's Party is likely to collaborate closely with the MPK. In order to maintain a façade of independence, Ahn dismissed the idea of forming an electoral alliance with the MPK, but said he would not bar party candidates from doing so individually. Attempts were made to reach a number of agreements, but in the end, only one materialized, in Chuncheon, Gangwon Province, where People's Party candidate Lee Yong-beom dropped out in favor of the MPK's Heo Yeong.

The MPK victory does not indicate public support for its policies. The election was marked by mass abstention and widespread ambivalence. Some 42 percent of eligible voters stayed away from the polls. Rather than out of conviction, many people cast ballots out of a vague sense of civic duty or to earn discounts at stores offering deals with proof that they had voted.

Many young people expressed their dissatisfaction with all the establishment parties. "I will exercise my right not to vote. In fact, I don't have much interest in politics. Neither do I believe the election will change our society," Jung Da-eun, a 25-year-old university

student from Seoul, told the *Korea Times* .

A young worker, Kim Ji-hye, expressed similar sentiments, saying: “I don’t really have any strong reason not to vote. But I just don’t care about politics. I don’t want to vote because there is no candidate whom I want to cast a ballot for.” Such statements are indicative of a political system that completely fails to address the needs of youth and the working class.

The MPK based its campaign on the claim that the Saenuri Party and the Park Geun-hye administration were solely responsible for poor economic conditions. On Tuesday, the International Monetary Fund cut its forecast for South Korea’s growth rate for 2016 to 2.7 percent, down from the 3.2 percent it predicted in October. The official youth unemployment rate reached 12.5 percent in February, an all-time high.

The MPK opposed labor reform bills pushed by the Park government that would expand South Korea’s low-paid, casual workforce. The MPK promised to create 700,000 regular jobs for young people. A regular job comes with contract protection, whereas irregular workers are paid less and can be fired at any time. The MPK claimed that it could create new positions by extending current government programs, including a mandatory youth employment quota, from public to private companies. In reality, this would expand the system of casualized workers.

A report published in January by the Korea Employment Information Service (KEIS) showed that only 15 percent of young people found regular job positions by participating in these government programs. Almost 60 percent were still looking for work, with the remainder working at irregular jobs or finding employment through other means.

“We found that the jobs that young people got through the government employment programs were not very good,” the KEIS said. “Young people are also citing problems such as low wages, poor benefits and long working hours.”

The MPK also hoped to capitalize on public opposition to a new “anti-terrorism” law passed by the Saenuri Party in March. The bill allows for the collection of people’s personal information by monitoring phone calls and bank accounts. The MPK, the People’s Party and the Justice Party conducted a nine-day filibuster to delay a vote on the bill. This was nothing more than an electoral stunt. Before its

passage, the MPK expressed support for the core provisions of the bill. Now that the legislation has passed, the Democrats have no intention of repealing it. Instead, they claimed before the election they would revise it, thus legitimizing expanded state surveillance of the population.

Not mentioned in the election was South Korea’s support for the United States’ “pivot to Asia,” directed against China. For all the parties, including those that attempt to pass themselves off as radical or progressive, the US alliance is an accepted fact, as are the escalating war plans being made behind the backs of the people.

The election took place in the shadow of the largest-ever US-South Korean military exercises, which began last month, involving 300,000 South Korean troops and 17,000 US personnel. The exercises are based on a new joint operational plan that shifts the focus of a war against North Korea from a nominally defensive stance to an offensive one.

In March, Washington and Seoul began discussions on the placement of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) batteries in South Korea. On the pretext of countering North Korea’s supposed nuclear threat, the batteries are ultimately aimed at giving the US the capacity to block retaliation by China or Russia in the event of a nuclear war. Conscious of public opposition to the war drive, none of the three major parties took a definite stand on the issue during the election.



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