

Democrat Moon Jae-in wins South Korean presidential election

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Moon Jae-in of the Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) won yesterday's presidential election in South Korea, securing 40.3 percent of the total vote in what amounted to a landslide in a crowded field. Moon will be sworn into office today as the first Democrat since Noh Moo-hyun held power from 2003-2008.

While formal results have not been announced, Moon's closest competitors, Hong Jun-pyo of the right-wing Liberty Korea Party (LKP) and Ahn Cheol-soo of the People's Party, have both conceded after securing 25 and 21.5 percent of votes respectively. Yu Seung-min of the right-wing Bareun party and Sim Sang-jeong of the pseudo-left Justice Party are projected to have gained about 7 and 6 percent respectively. The turnout was a record 77.2 percent of voting population or 42.5 million voters.

Moon won the election by appealing to fears of a US-led war with North Korea, making promises to resolve the country's worsening social and economic crisis, and capitalising on the impeachment of former president Park Geun-hye on corruption charges. He delivered his victory speech in Gwanghwamun, Seoul, the site of mass protests against Park who was removed from office on March 10, triggering yesterday's poll.

White House press secretary Sean Spicer congratulated Moon, saying that the Trump administration looked forward to working together to strengthen the US-South Korean military alliance. However, while Moon has repeatedly emphasized his commitment to the alliance, he has called for a return to the so-called Sunshine Policy to improve relations between the two Koreas and defuse the current tense standoff between the US and North Korea.

Speaking to the *Financial Times*, Moon suggested that he would adopt a carrot and stick approach, saying: "If, in addition to stronger sanctions and pressure, we

comprehensively push for active engagement, including dialogue, with the North, it might be possible for the regime to change its path." He has promised to reopen the Kaesong Industrial Complex—a joint cheap labour zone inside North Korea set up under the Sunshine Policy—closed by Park Geun-hye in February 2016.

Moon's approach might coincide with Trump's apparent tactic at present—giving China a short window of opportunity to bully North Korea into abandoning its nuclear and missile programs. However, Trump officials have repeatedly declared that all options, including the use of military force, are on the table. In that event, Moon could quickly find himself at variance with Washington and subject to enormous pressure.

Former South Korean vice-foreign minister Kim Sung-han told the *Financial Times* that frictions between Seoul and Washington could emerge. "There is inevitably going to be some noise," he said. Moon is likely to put more emphasis on dialogue, while Washington is more likely to take a hardline policy. This may prompt a conflict of opinions."

Moon is already confronting a conundrum over the US installation of a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile battery in South Korea, which became operational on May 1. Moon postured as an opponent of the deeply-unpopular THAAD system, criticized its accelerated deployment, promised to review the installation, but did not pledge to remove it from South Korea.

Moon is hoping to improve relations with China, which has demanded the removal of the THAAD battery amid concerns that its radar system can monitor Chinese missiles. Beijing has also retaliated economically against South Korean corporations. However, any attempt by Moon to dismantle the THAAD battery could cause a major rift with

Washington.

Significantly, CIA director Mike Pompeo made an unannounced visit to Seoul just over a week prior to the election, undoubtedly to discuss not only North Korea, but a likely Moon win.

In the final weeks of his campaign, Moon stressed his agreement with the Trump administration and his support for the US alliance. He has called for a more prominent role for South Korea in North East Asia affairs and suggested that Washington should follow Seoul's lead over North Korea. However, like previous Democrat presidents, Kim Dae Jung and Noh Moon-hyun, Moon will bend over backwards to avoid any rift with the US.

Moon worked as a lawyer before serving as an important campaigner for Noh Moon-hyun in 2002 and served as senior secretary to Noh from 2005-2006 and as chief of staff from 2007–2008. Despite tensions between then-President Bush and Noh, the latter dispatched South Korean troops to take part in the illegal US-led occupation of Iraq. When challenged over his defense policies, Moon points to his record as a conscript into the country's special forces who are trained for sabotage behind the North Korean lines.

Domestically, the Noh administration continued the privatization of state-owned companies begun under Kim Dae-jung and oversaw the rapid increase of “irregular workers,” who have no job protection and earn significantly less than others doing the same work. Moon has made a number of pro-business pledges, including forming a “Fourth Industrial Revolution” committee to provide government support for technology companies and to turn South Korea into a nation of startups.

A day before the election, Moon visited Gangnam, Seoul, the capital's wealthiest district, to address the business concerns over some of his campaign promises to secure working class votes. “We will show Moon's determination to be backed evenly across the country,” one of his campaigners, Jeon Byeong-heon, declared.

In other words, despite pledges to enforce a maximum 52-hour work week and eliminate discrimination against irregular workers, Moon is more than willing to make concessions to big business. His other pledges include the creation of 810,000 jobs, mostly in the public sector as well as opening up new positions through job sharing—a policy that former right-

wing president Lee Myung-bak used to cut workers' salaries in return for hiring additional employees. All candidates routinely make such pledges only to cast them aside after being elected.

Backed by the significant sections of the ruling class, the Democrat presidents Kim Dae-jung and Noh Moon-hyun came to power in the midst of the economic and political turmoil triggered by the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis. They enforced the demands of International Monetary Fund and investors for far-reaching pro-market restructuring, leading to widespread sackings, the undermining of wages and conditions and deepening social inequality. The resulting widespread alienation among working people was a major factor in enabling the return of the right wing—Lee Myung-bak in 2008 and Park Geun-hye in 2013.

Moon's election is likewise aimed at defusing widespread hostility towards the political establishment over declining living standards, anti-democratic measures and the growing threat of war and preventing the development of a political movement of the working class against the profit system itself.



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