

South Korea to hold general election

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South Korea will hold its general election for the National Assembly this Wednesday amid the global COVID-19 pandemic. The various parties of the South Korean ruling class will vie for all 300 seats in the unicameral body, with legislators elected to four-year terms. None have a progressive way forward as the economy declines and workers, farmers, and youth face increased attacks on working and living conditions.

The contest is largely between the ruling Democratic Party of Korea (DP) and the main opposition United Future Party (UFP), which was formed in February following a merger of the right-wing Liberty Korea Party and smaller conservative parties and organizations. The so-called liberal DP is banking on the apparent success of the Moon Jae-in administration's response to COVID-19, while the UFP has called on voters to "judge" the government, particularly over the economy.

The DP is likely to win the election, with an April 8 Gallup Korea poll showing the ruling party with a 21-point lead over the UFP. However, reflecting broad dissatisfaction with the political system, 18 percent of people did not support any party. Regardless of who wins, the government will remain in the hands of President Moon, a Democrat, whose term does not run out until 2022.

Park Sung-min, the head of political polling company Min Consulting, told the *New York Times*, "The epidemic sidelined all the policy complaints about President Moon. Instead, people believe that his government has done quite well as they see the epidemic spiralling out of control in other countries."

However, the ruling class acts to benefit itself. South Korea was one of the hardest-hit countries outside of the Middle East during the 2015 Middle East Respiratory Syndrome outbreak. Seoul's incompetent response then led to widespread anger, which contributed to the massive anti-government protests a little more than a year later.

Today, Moon's government responded to the COVID-19 pandemic with police state measures that could easily be turned against the working class,

especially as the economy worsens amid growth predictions of less than 1 percent or even negative.

After two days of early voting on Friday and Saturday, voter turnout stands at 26.69 percent, the highest since advance voting was introduced in 2014. The high turnout was attributed to people hoping to avoid large crowds on election day to minimize potential exposure to COVID-19.

South Korea's election is being held when at least 47 countries around the world have cancelled or postponed elections due to COVID-19. However, ballots will not be gathered from eligible Korean voters living in at least 55 countries, including the United States, affecting an estimated 87,252 people, or little more than half of overseas voters.

In order to provide safety for voters, South Korea's National Election Commission issued guidelines for voters and polling stations that include maintaining social distancing, regularly sanitizing voting booths, and setting aside separate voting stations for anyone showing symptoms of COVID-19.

It is not out of the question that a state with a long history of falsifying or otherwise interfering in elections could exploit the confusion at polling places to alter results. Most recently, South Korea's National Intelligence Service interfered in the 2012 presidential election to secure a victory for Park Geun-hye by waging an online smear campaign against then-candidate Moon Jae-in.

The election is also the first under a new law passed last December that changes the manner in which the 47 proportionally allocated seats in the National Assembly are distributed. The new law was supposedly meant to make it easier for minor parties to win seats in the legislature by changing how 30 seats are selected while maintaining the old system for the other 17.

The law faced opposition from conservatives who feared the changes would favour the liberal parties. To take advantage of the new system, both major parties have set up satellite parties, the Together Citizens' Party

affiliated with the DP and the Future Korea Party with the UFP to win additional seats in the National Assembly with the intention of merging them with the main parties after the election.

The new laws also lower the minimum voting age from 19 to 18. Clearly concerned about widespread political disaffection among younger people, UFP's Kim Dae-ho declared on April 6, "People in their 50s to 70s have logic when they bring up an issue. But people in their 30s to 40s do not have logic but only vague sentiment, huge ignorance, and delusions."

In a bid to contain the political damage, the UFP expelled Kim the following day and issued an apology.

One blogger in his 30s responded to Kim's comments online, saying, "All age groups, not only those in their 30s and 40s but also those in their teens and 20s, have their own hardships. If we are that illogical and ignorant, why are they begging us for votes?"

As a result of policies carried out by both Democratic and conservative administrations, wages over the last two decades have stagnated and workers increasingly have difficulty finding stable, regular employment.

A study released at the end of last year by the Korea Economic Research Institute found that from 2008 to 2018, youth unemployment grew by 28.3 percent. While the official unemployment rate for those 15 to 29 hovers around 10 percent, the real rate is more than double this when taking into account those in underpaid part-time positions.

The COVID-19 pandemic will only accelerate the attacks on working conditions. On April 8, President Moon unveiled another massive bailout of big business totalling 53.7 trillion won (\$US44 billion). At least 36 trillion won will go to prop up export companies. The government will expect the working class to foot the bill.



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