

South Korea's Democratic Party wins general election in landslide

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On Wednesday, the ruling Democratic Party of Korea (DP) won a landslide victory in the South Korean general election, defeating the main opposition United Future Party (UFP) and retaining control of the National Assembly. Legislators serve four-year terms in the 300-seat unicameral body.

The DP won 163 seats outright while the UFP took only 84 with those totals rising to 180 and 103 when proportionally-allocated seats were added. To procure the additional seats, both parties took advantage of a new electoral law passed in December by setting up satellite parties known as the Together Citizens' Party and the Future Korea Party respectively, with the explicit intention of merging these into the main parties.

The election is the first in 16 years that the ruling party has won a majority in the National Assembly and ensures that the Democrats and President Moon Jae-in will have full control of the government. A voting bloc controlling 180 seats or three-fifths of the total can pass almost any legislation except for changes to the constitution, which requires an additional 20 votes.

DP Chairman Lee Hae-chan stated after the election, "We will do our best to overcome the war against the coronavirus and the economic crisis so as to reward people's support for us." The DP was the beneficiary of the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the explosion of infections in February, public support for Moon had fallen to 41 percent while the Democrats approval rating stood at just 34 percent.

Hwang Gyo-an, who served as UFP chairman, stepped down from his position Wednesday night as his party's defeat became clear. He remarked, "I will take all responsibility. As I promised earlier, I will give up my party post to hold myself accountable for the

election outcome." Resignations are a common practice in South Korean politics after an election loss and are largely ceremonial shows of contrition.

Hwang also lost his race against Lee Nak-yeon in Seoul's Jongno district, where numerous government offices are located. Both men are former prime ministers, with Lee and Hwang serving under Presidents Moon and Park Geun-hye respectively. The race was seen as a potential presidential match-up in 2022 when Moon's single term ends.

Despite the COVID-19 outbreak, voter turnout was an estimated 66.2 percent, the highest rate since 1992 and an 8.2 percent increase over 2016. While the establishment media celebrated this outcome, a third of the eligible voting population, or 14.9 million people, still did not vote, an indication of widespread discontent with the candidates and parties. The election was also the first in which 18-year-olds could vote, with the eligible age lowered last December from 19, adding 540,000 new voters.

The same law changed the basis for seats elected on a proportional basis and allowed the two biggest parties set up their satellites. Supposedly meant to help smaller parties win more proportional seats by changing how they are distributed, the legislation had the opposite effect as most of the minor parties have been swept from the National Assembly.

The third largest party in the legislature is now the pseudo-left Justice Party, which won one directly elected seat and five proportional seats, maintaining its total in the legislature. The Party for People's Livelihoods (PPL), which held 20 seats before the election, was swept out of the legislature all together. The PPL consists of anti-Park Geun-hye conservatives as well as right-wing Democrats who were followers of former President Kim Dae-jung.

Other parties winning a handful of seats include the People's Party (three proportional seats), which is a former ally of the PPL and led by Ahn Cheol-soo, and the Open Democratic Party (three proportional seats), another DP offshoot. Five so-called independents also won seats.

In its campaign, the DP capitalized on the COVID-19 pandemic to claim that it had successfully contained the outbreak. The government was well aware that another bungled response to a disease outbreak similar to that during the 2015 Middle East Respiratory Syndrome outbreak could generate widespread discontent, particularly as support for the government fell.

In the aftermath of the election, however, the Moon administration will accelerate its efforts to prop up big business and foist the burden of the pandemic onto the backs of workers. The International Monetary Fund predicts that South Korean economy will contract by 1.2 percent in 2020—the first period of negative growth since 1997–1998 Asian Financial Crisis.

In response to that crisis, the DP imposed the IMF's demands for the pro-market restructuring of the economy. While in power under Kim Dae-jung and Noh Moo-hyun, the Democrats oversaw massive job cuts and the casualization of the workforce, the effects of which led to a real youth unemployment rate of nearly 25 percent, as well as stagnant wages, and other attacks on working conditions.

President Moon warned on Monday that “this may be (just) the beginning of pain” while claiming his administration would prioritize protecting jobs. What this means is more government handouts for big business, on top of the trillions of won already spent, supposedly to prevent further layoffs. The Bank of Korea has also already promised an unlimited amount of funds to financial firms.

In fact, major job cuts are being planned with tens of thousands of jobs on the chopping block. Workers have already faced firings, unpaid furloughs, and large wage cuts. In March alone, there were approximately 156,000 applications for unemployment benefits, a 24.8 percent increase over the same month in 2019 and the biggest since the 2008–09 global financial crisis.

The new legislature and the Moon administration will only accelerate these attacks which will provoke resistance from the working class. The government will not hesitate to use the police-state measures rolled out

to combat COVID-19—such as the tracking of hundreds of thousands of people—against workers fighting to defend their jobs and health.

Workers, farmers, and youth must turn to their counterparts around the world who are also being driven into conflict with their ruling classes who are determined to enhance their profits and wealth whatever the costs to working people. What is needed is a unified struggle to reconstruct society on a socialist basis to protect the lives and meet the pressing social needs of the entire population.



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