

Right-wing candidate narrowly wins South Korean presidential election

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Yoon Suk-yeol, from the right-wing People Power Party (PPP), narrowly defeated Lee Jae-myung of the ruling Democratic Party of Korea (DP) in South Korea's presidential election last Wednesday, securing 48.6 percent of the vote to the latter's 47.8 percent. Yoon will be inaugurated on May 10. Voter turnout reached 77.1 percent.

Yoon will replace Moon Jae-in, who won the 2017 presidential election following the impeachment and removal from office of President Park Geun-hye. Mass protests against Park over corruption allegations forced the government to remove her from office to forestall a wider explosion of anger at the political establishment as a whole. Riding this anti-Park wave, Moon was easily elected to office, but was ineligible for re-election as South Korean presidents can only serve one term.

The political crisis surrounding the mass protests and Park's impeachment led to a collapse of support and the fragmentation of her Saenuri Party. The forerunner of the PPP—the Grand Unified New Party, quickly changed to the United Future Party—was only formed in 2020 as the merger of three right-wing parties that all trace their origins to the Saenuri Party.

Yoon was chosen as the PPP's candidate in an attempt to distance the party from the crisis surrounding Park's impeachment. He has never been elected as a legislator but rose to prominence as a government prosecutor. He served as the lead prosecutor in the corruption investigation that led to Park's imprisonment.

Moon appointed Yoon, then officially an independent, as prosecutor general in 2019. However, Yoon rapidly fell out with the ruling Democratic Party over his decision to prosecute Justice Minister Cho Kuk and was ultimately forced to resign in March 2021. He

was almost immediately courted by the PPP, which presented Yoon as an anti-corruption figure opposed to Moon who had increasingly become unpopular.

Yoon's election and the return to power of the unified conservative party are the result above all of the deep unpopularity of the Moon administration, which is responsible for the social crisis produced by the COVID-19 pandemic. With the assistance of the trade unions, Moon and the Democrats have sought to suppress growing unrest in the working class, reflected in strikes over pay, jobs and working conditions.

Two years ago, the DP won a huge majority in the National Assembly, taking 180 seats out of a total of 300, as people demonstrated their support for the government's initial handling of the pandemic. At first, the Moon administration implemented widespread testing and contact tracing, closed schools, and enforced social distancing measures that managed to keep case numbers low.

However, social conditions have sharply deteriorated. Officially, the 3.7 percent unemployment rate is relatively low, but this hides the reality workers face. Statistics Korea reported on January 24 that more than 3 million people had given up looking for work last year, a number not included in the official unemployment rate.

For young people aged 15 to 29, the situation is bleak. The real unemployment rate is approximately 25 percent when the underemployed and those who have given up looking for work are calculated. Apartment prices have also doubled in the last five years, meaning for many young people securing a job and starting a family is far out of their reach.

Like its counterparts around the world, the Moon administration, under pressure from big business, has largely eliminated the initial public health measures put

in place to stop the spread of COVID-19, resulting in a staggering rise in infections, hospitalizations and deaths.

On Election Day, the daily total of infections hit 342,446, eclipsing the previous record high by more than 75,000, and the largest figure reported by any country in the world. Deaths are rising as the hospital system is becoming overwhelmed. More than 1,100 people are in intensive care units, including a number of people in their 30s and under. On average, 167 people are dying a week, including a teenager who passed away a day before the election.

Yoon and Lee Jae-myung largely ignored the pandemic during the election campaign. Neither candidate put forward any serious response to the growing health crisis highlighting the huge gulf between the concerns of working people and the political establishment as a whole.

The hostility towards the two main parties was reflected in the comments of voters. Lee So-jeong told the *Chosun Ilbo*, “We feel that we’re voting for the lesser evil. That’s not what an election is supposed to be. Ideally, you have a lot of options... But these candidates, either one, there will be no real change.”

In an election campaign dominated by mudslinging and scandal-mongering, Yoon latched onto the feminism and the Me-too movement backed by the Democrats to blame the lack of jobs for young men on discrimination. He plans to abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality.

The gender politics of both Yoon and Moon is reactionary as it sows divisions in the working class and diverts attention from the real cause of unemployment—the capitalist system.

Yoon will only deepen the attacks on the working class as he pursues economic policies to boost the profits of big business. In his first press conference last Thursday, the president-elect stressed that his administration will rely on the “free market” and remove restrictions that hamper its operation.

These will include “more flexibility in working hours,” putting greater burdens on workers to enable manufacturers to operate around the clock. He also pledged tax breaks for small businesses and the easing of regulations on so-called platform companies offering digital online services.

Under the pretext of addressing the housing crisis,

Yoon is promising a lowering of property taxes and an easing of regulations on home loans—measures that will be a boon to property developers and real estate agents.

Yoon has also foreshadowed attacks on the country’s limited welfare payments, saying, “Without growth, welfare, which is necessary, cannot continue.”

In foreign policy, Yoon has pledged to deepen cooperation with US imperialism, taking a particularly anti-China tone during his campaign. He has promised to work closely with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or Quad, a Washington-led quasi-military alliance targeting China that includes the US, Japan, Australia and India.

Yoon’s election will only heighten tensions with North Korea. During a February 25 debate, he exploited the war in Ukraine to call for a bolstering of the South Korean military’s offensive capabilities. “The situation in Ukraine,” he stated, “shows us that national security and peace cannot be maintained with agreements on paper. War can be prevented only by securing a pre-emptive strike capacity.”

Yoon has also pledged to deploy a second US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery in South Korea. The first battery’s deployment was concluded under Moon. These anti-ballistic missile systems are an integral component of US preparations for nuclear war. Far from being “defensive,” they are designed to counter retaliation in the event of a US first strike on Russia or China.

The incoming Yoon administration will only exacerbate the danger of war on the Korean Peninsula and the broader Indo-Pacific region as it carries out class war measures to further shift the burden of the country’s economic crisis onto the working class.



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