South Korean ruling conservative party secures victory in local elections

Ben McGrath
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On June 1, South Korea held regional elections across the country for provincial governors, city mayors and various local councils. The elections resulted in a trouncing for the Democratic Party of Korea (DP), following its defeat in the presidential election in March. The results are less an endorsement of the ruling People Power Party (PPP) than an expression of mass dissatisfaction with the DP after five years in power.

The ruling PPP, which came to national office on May 10 with the inauguration of President Yoon Suk-yeol, took 12 out of 17 provincial governorships and large city mayorships, like Seoul and Busan.

The PPP also took 540 seats out of 872 in city and provincial councils as well as 145 out of 226 lower-level administration positions. The PPP and DP roughly split the 2,988 local council seats that were also up for election. In addition, seven National Assembly seats were contested in a by-election, with five going to the PPP and two to the DP.

Lee Jae-myung, the DP's presidential candidate whom Yoon defeated in March, secured one of the seats in the National Assembly, running in Incheon.

Another former presidential candidate, Ahn Cheol-soo, won a parliamentary seat for Seongnam, just south of Seoul. Ahn, now a member of the PPP, typifies political opportunism, once posturing as a progressive political outsider. He has formally been an independent, a member of the Democratic Party when it was known as the New Politics Alliance for Democracy, and a leading figure in the minor conservative People's Party, which merged with the PPP this year.

Turnout was at a near record-low for regional elections, with only 50.9 percent of eligible voters casting a ballot. This was the second lowest turnout since a 48.9 percent turnout in 2002, when both major parties were widely reviled as a result of the 1997–1998 Asian financial crisis and the mass layoffs, wage cuts, and corporate restructuring that took place in its wake.

In much the same way, the entire political establishment in South Korea today stands discredited, as do the official parties in countries around the world. One eligible voter in her 30s, when asked her thoughts on the election, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "I don't think about it. It has nothing to do with me."

Under former President Moon Jae-in and the DP, which secured a large parliamentary majority in the 2020 National Assembly elections, economic inequality grew sharply.

Government claims of a record-low unemployment rate of 2.7 percent hid the reality for many workers who had either given up looking for work or were underemployed, with the real jobless rate estimated at 11 percent at the end of 2021. Young people between the ages of 15 and 29 have been particularly hard hit, with the real youth unemployment rate regularly estimated to be between 20 and 25 percent.

The Moon government also lifted nearly all of its COVID-19 prevention measures at the behest of big business, allowing the virus to run rampant. This led to massive infection numbers, especially among children and teenagers, and more than 24,000 official deaths. Over one hundred people continue to die each week.

President Yoon and the PPP are now using the widespread anger towards the DP to declare a supposed mandate for deepening attacks on the working class.

"I take the election results as the people's call to revive the economy and take better care of their livelihoods," Yoon said in a statement. He said that the government "will put all of its energy into stabilizing the public's livelihoods with the attitude that the first, second and third [most important thing] is the

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economy."

If the South Korean ruling class is now turning to the PPP, it is because it believes the conservative party is the most capable of carrying out the assault on workers that the capitalist class is demanding as economic uncertainty grows as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the US-NATO instigated war against Russia in Ukraine.

The Bank of Korea (BOK) cut its estimated growth rate for 2022 at the end of May from 3 percent to 2.7 percent. The International Monetary Fund likewise reduced its estimate for South Korea from 3 to 2.5 percent.

Consumers also face a surge in prices. Inflation stood at 5.4 percent last month, a sharp increase from 4.8 percent in April and the first time consumer prices have surpassed 5 percent since 2008, during the global financial crisis.

The BOK is also estimating that inflation will exceed 6 percent in the second half of the year. Eo Un-seon, a Statistics Korea official, told the media, "In May, prices of petroleum products and processed foods, and personal service prices extended their high growth. The price growth of farm products also picked up."

The Yoon administration has pledged to create a "business friendly" environment where all barriers to profit making will be torn down, including the modicum of job protections that exist. It had pledged to enforce "labor flexibility," a euphemism for mass job and wage cuts.

The Democrats, who still maintain a large majority in the National Assembly with 169 seats out of 300 to the PPP's 114, are not opposed to this agenda, but will seek to direct workers' anger into political dead-ends.

The deepening social and economic crisis is fueling mounting working-class struggle.

Truck drivers in the Cargo Truckers Solidarity (CTS) union launched a strike on Tuesday, demanding a minimum freight fare to offset surging fuel costs.

They are also calling for the extension of the Safe Trucking Freight Rates System, which sets a legal minimum freight rate and will expire at the end of this year. The system is also meant to ensure safe driving, so drivers do not feel pressured to deliver goods at higher speeds just to make ends meet.

The CTS is affiliated with the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), which postures as a militant organization, but politically backs the Democrats. CTS officials stated beforehand that most of its 25,000 members would take part in the strike, but only approximately 9,000 workers participated on the first day.

The unions are desperately seeking to isolate the emerging struggles of workers, in line with their role as a police force of governments and the employers.

To develop the fight for their social rights, workers must take their struggles out of the hands of the unions by forming independent rank-and-file committees. The bipartisan program of mass COVID infection and an assault on jobs, wages and conditions underscores the need for a break with the entire political establishment and a turn to a genuine alternative, a socialist and internationalist perspective.

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