

South Korea's Democrats obtain large majority in general election

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South Korea's main opposition Democratic Party (DP) won a landslide victory in Wednesday's quadrennial general election to select a new National Assembly, defeating the ruling People Power Party (PPP). While it represents a rebuke of the PPP and the administration of President Yoon Suk-yeol, the Democrats have no fundamental differences with the pro-war and anti-working-class agenda of the PPP.

Of the 300 seats available in the unicameral legislature, 254 were allocated based on direct election and the other 46 distributed according to proportional votes. The Democrats, who already held a majority prior to the election, increased their seat count from 156 to 175. This includes 14 seats for the DP's satellite party, the Democratic Alliance, a grouping of members from the DP and the minor Progressive Party and the New Progressive Alliance. In contrast, the PPP and its satellite People Future Party took only 90 and 18 seats respectively, a total loss of six for the bloc.

The PPP will remain the ruling party as President Yoon will still be in office for another three years. South Korean presidents are chosen in separate elections for single, five-year terms.

Following the release of the election results, DP leader Lee Jae-myung claimed, "The voters' choice is a judgment of the Yoon Suk-yeol administration, as well as an act of giving the Democratic Party and me the responsibility to create a better world by taking responsibility for people's livelihood issues."

The results, however, are less a vote of confidence in the DP than an expression of anger towards the current administration. Only two years ago, Yoon managed to defeat Lee in the presidential election following five years of Democrat Moon Jae-in as president and two years of a DP controlled legislature. Voter turnout in the recent election stood at approximately 67 percent,

an indication of widespread dissatisfaction.

Both the South Korean and foreign press have also emphasized the "unlikability" of both Yoon Suk-yeol and Lee Jae-myung. If only in a distorted form, the "unlikability" of the two party leaders is a sign of widespread anger towards the ruling establishment as a whole.

In addition, the election itself was an anti-democratic process in which the two major parties edged out even nominal competition from minor parties. Rather than directly compete for proportionally allocated seats, both the DP and PPP created satellites to take advantage of a 2019 law supposedly meant to favor minor parties. Splinter groups were also formed from the larger parties. Most notably is the Rebuilding Korea Party of Jo Guk, a justice minister in the former Moon administration.

Jo pledged to work with the DP, attempting to put a phony left-wing face on the Democrats by criticizing President Yoon's "prosecutor dictatorship," a reference to Yoon's previous position as South Korea's prosecutor general. Jo's party took 12 seats.

The New Future Party of former Democrat bigwig Lee Nak-yeon took one seat and the Progressive Party also picked up a seat, bringing the Democrats entire bloc in the National Assembly up to 189. The New Reform Party of former PPP leader Lee Jun-seok took three seats.

While the DP and PPP paid lip service to the issues facing workers and youth, they sought to make the election a contest between President Yoon and DP leader Lee, covering up the fact that both parties have a record of attacking the social position of working people and lining up with US preparations for war with China.

The Democrats denounced Yoon as "incompetent,"

calling on voters to “judge” his administration. However, it is not Yoon’s “incompetence” that prevents him from addressing the needs of broad layers of the population. He carries out the demands of big business, which includes attacks on the position of the working class, as the Democrats would do in similar fashion were they in office.

On the other hand, the PPP sought to portray Lee Jae-myung, who has been embroiled in politically-motivated corruption scandals, as a criminal who would jeopardize the US-South Korean alliance while being subservient to China. PPP leader Han Dong-hun stated last Sunday, “Criminal suspects will run the country the way they want in order to protect themselves. And in the course of that, many foundations we have established will collapse and the (South) Korea-US alliance could collapse.”

The failure of the PPP’s promotion of Seoul’s alliance to win votes points to a latent anti-war sentiment within the South Korean working class. However, this finds no expression within the DP. During the election, the Democrats consciously covered up the growing danger of a US-led war with China, which the Yoon administration has fully embraced.

Instead, the DP focused its campaign on the Korean Peninsula, claiming the party would step up negotiations with the US, Japan, Russia, and China over North Korea in order to posture as anti-war. In reality, this means limiting any “anti-war” measures to those approved by Washington, which has no intention of pulling back from a conflict with Beijing. At the same time, the DP pledged to acquire new weapon systems in an acknowledgment of the growing war danger.

Furthermore, both the DP and the PPP will be united in carrying out attacks on the working class as big business calls for an assault on workers’ wages and jobs, in response to the international crisis of capitalism. Last year, the economy grew by only 1.4 percent.

The Korean Enterprises Federation last month published a report stating that South Korean workers’ monthly wages now surpass those of their counterparts in Japan as of 2022, or 3,998,000 won (\$US2,929) and 3,791,000 won (\$US2,778) respectively.

This prompted the right-wing financial publication *Korea Economic Daily* to complain that South Korean

workers’ productivity was supposedly lower than in Japan. “Wage increases without productivity growth are not only unsustainable but also harm national competitiveness,” the paper stated, declaring there was an “urgency for Korea to implement labor reforms, including a drastic relaxing of regulations on large conglomerates.”

Yet wages are already stagnating or have dropped. In the fourth quarter of 2023, real wages fell by 1.9 percent with inflation. At the same time, expenses have grown including for housing and utilities, which rose by 9.5 percent.

Household debt has also surged as workers are forced to take out larger and larger loans. According to the Bank of Korea last September, it would take 26 years-worth of an average worker’s salary to purchase a medium-sized apartment. For young people in their 20s and 30s, as much as a third of their income can be taken up by monthly rent or loan repayments. At the end of 2023, household debt in South Korea reached 100.1 percent of GDP, higher than Thailand (91.6 percent), the US (72.8 percent), and Japan (64.1 percent).

As workers and youth come into struggle against the Yoon administration, the Democrats will function as a loyal opposition and seek to channel discontent back into safe parliamentary channels, as they have done in the past.



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