

# South Korean parties select their candidates for presidential election

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South Korea will hold its presidential election on June 3 to replace impeached president Yoon Suk-yeol, who was removed from office by the Constitutional Court last month for imposing martial law in a December coup attempt.

The current frontrunner is Lee Jae-myung of the main opposition Democratic Party (DP), who won the party's primary on April 27. He served as the party's head until last month when he resigned his position to campaign for presidency. He also ran for president in 2017 but lost in the primary to eventual winner Moon Jae-in; and again in 2022 when he narrowly lost to Yoon.

A National Assembly lawmaker, Lee is expected to capitalize on widespread anger towards Yoon and his right-wing People Power Party (PPP) for the failed martial law declaration as well as over Yoon's anti-working-class policies. The PPP is the party most closely associated with the military and the US alliance, as popular anti-war sentiment grows.

During Yoon's presidency, real wages for workers stagnated or declined. In 2024, the gap between the annual average income of the top 10 percent and bottom 10 percent reached a record high of 200.32 million won (\$US143,101). Moreover, the wealthiest layer held assets on average totalling over 1.5 billion won (\$US1.1 million) more than the poorest layer.

South Korea faces the potential imposition of 25 percent tariffs from the United States, which would negatively impact its export-driven economy. The Bank of Korea in April predicted that GDP growth this year will be lower than its previous estimates of just 1.5 percent.

Lee does not offer a progressive way forward. The DP candidate was once described as the "South Korean Bernie Sanders" who had vowed to break up the family-

owned chaebol conglomerates that dominate the economy, such as Samsung and Hyundai Motors, while pushing through welfare reform. However, like Sanders in the US, Lee's rhetoric is designed to trap workers and youth within the Democratic Party, one of the two main parties of big business in South Korea.

As he did during his 2022 presidential run, Lee has made overtures to big business to demonstrate he has no intention of carrying out even moderate reforms that infringe on big business profits. Lee declared in February for example while visiting a Hyundai Motors plant, "The growth of a corporation is ultimately everything for a country."

Lee has also praised South Korea's military alliance with the US and Japan, indicating his support for the Washington-led war drive against China. Last month he stated: "Realistically speaking, the South Korea-US alliance is important, and South Korea, US, Japan cooperation is important. Within that, the consistent principle is that the national interest of the Republic of Korea is the top priority."

Complicating matters, however, Lee faces a criminal trial stemming from accusations that he violated the election law by making false statements during the 2022 presidential campaign. The Supreme Court on May 1 overturned an acquittal from the Seoul High Court in the case and ordered a retrial.

If found guilty and fined more than one million won (\$US715), Lee would be stripped of his seat in the National Assembly and barred from running for office for five years. The process, including a potential appeal, is not likely to conclude before the election. It is unclear what would happen if Lee is elected president while the trial continues, though it would certainly contribute to South Korea's political instability.

Lee will be opposed by the PPP's Kim Moon-soo, who was selected as the party's presidential candidate on May 3. Kim is an extreme right-wing figure, who was appointed labor minister in Yoon Suk-yeol's cabinet last August. Kim is viciously anti-working class, denouncing the act of striking as illegal. He has previously called for "bombarding the laborers with damage claims [as] the most effective remedy for illegal strikes."

Kim's last election race was in 2018 when he unsuccessfully ran for mayor of Seoul. The previous year, he aligned himself with the so-called *Taegeukgi* rallies, far-right demonstrations launched in support of former President Park Geun-hye, who was removed from office in 2017 for corruption. *Taegeukgi* is the name for the South Korean flag.

This far-right movement includes fascistic elements and has continued as supporters of Yoon. While lacking any popular support, they staged protests during Yoon's impeachment, waving South Korean and US flags and appealing to Trump in the US for support. These rallies have for years been marked by calls for violence against political opponents, who are denounced as "communists" and "North Korean sympathizers." In 2019, Kim declared that then-President Moon Jae-in "deserves to be executed by a firing squad."

Kim gained popularity within the PPP for his refusal to apologize for Yoon's declaration of martial law while other cabinet members did so. He also opposed Yoon's impeachment.

That such a candidate could run for president so soon after Yoon's attempted coup and the mass protests that erupted against his government is ultimately a result of the perfidy of the Democratic Party.

The Democrats demobilized the protest movement in December, which at their height, involved two million people demonstrating in Seoul alone. The DP was afraid that this movement would grow and participants, particularly workers, would begin putting forward demands that went beyond Yoon's removal from office. Lee Jae-myung also personally intervened with the Korean Railway Workers' Union to shut down a strike.

The DP presented Yoon's initial suspension from office in December as a victory for democracy and claimed his removal from office was all but ensured,

though this was far from clear at the time. This provided Yoon and the PPP with breathing space to rally their supporters on the far-right.

Kim Moon-soo is not the only candidate associated with Yoon's government running for election. Han Duck-soo, the prime minister and acting president, last week resigned from office and announced his own plans to run on May 2. He is a career bureaucrat and nominally an independent. He is popular among PPP members and his campaign stated Sunday that he would allow the PPP to set the terms for fielding a unified candidacy with Kim.

As the acting president, Han protected Yoon during the impeachment process by refusing to appoint judges to vacancies on the Constitutional Court, thereby increasing the probability of Yoon's acquittal.

Han has declared that if elected he would resign three years into his five-year term after pushing through a constitutional revision to limit the power of the National Assembly. His goal would be "for the president and the National Assembly to share power amid checks and balances"—in reality, to restrict parliament's ability to counter the president's actions. Yoon justified his coup attempt by claiming the DP majority in the National Assembly blocked key aspects of his agenda, necessitating martial law.

Regardless which of the three candidates wins the election, he will be tasked with suppressing growing working-class opposition. The political crisis in South Korea has not been resolved with Yoon's removal from office but rather is amid growing political and economic instability around the globe.



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