

Official campaigning underway in South Korean presidential election

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Official campaigning for South Korea's June 3 presidential election began Monday. The election is being held to replace former President Yoon Suk-yeol, who was removed from office last month following an impeachment trial for attempting to impose martial law in December.

A total of seven candidates are running in the contest following a registration period over the weekend. This includes the contenders from the two main parties of big business: frontrunner Lee Jae-myung of the main opposition Democratic Party (DP) and Kim Moon-soo of the right-wing People Power Party (PPP).

Other candidates include Lee Jun-seok, one-time PPP leader and founder of the minor Reform Party (also known as the New Reform Party), which split from the PPP; and Gwon Yeong-guk of the Democratic Labor Party (DLP). The DLP is a newly-formed electoral vehicle comprising parties from the so-called "progressive bloc" in alliance with the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU). This misnamed "progressive bloc" serves as an appendage of the Democratic Party.

The election takes place amid a growing international crisis, with the US President Trump waging a trade war, including 25 percent tariffs on automobiles as well as steel and aluminum. He has threatened an additional 25 percent "reciprocal" tariff on South Korean exports to the US at a time when the country's economy is already stagnating and real wages are falling. Deepening tensions in the region fuelled by the US also place South Korea on the front lines of a potential war with China.

Current opinion polls show Lee Jae-myung far ahead of Kim Moon-soo—a Realmeter poll conducted last week put their support at 52.1 percent and 31.1 percent respectively. Lee is capitalizing on the widespread

popular anger over Yoon Suk-yeol's coup attempt and the PPP's opposition to the impeachment process.

Lee declared on Monday, "The presidential election is not a battle between the DP and the PPP, but a battle against the entrenched elite who have destroyed constitutional order and people's lives through the insurrection." He said his election would put an end to this period of insurrection.

Lee, who comes from a working-class background, is also presenting himself as a "man of the people" who will respect labor. The history of the Democratic Party demonstrates this is a lie. The Democrats were responsible for enforcing the casualization of the working class during the 1990s and 2000s. During the previous Democrat administration of Moon Jae-in (2017–2022), the party oversaw the rapid growth of social inequality while backing the US-led war drive against China.

Lee would be no different. During a meeting with major corporate lobbies on May 8, he essentially declared he would allow big business to set his economic agenda: "[A]t the center of the economic recovery are businesses. If you (corporations) present a path for growth and development, I will actively embrace it and work to turn it into better policies and put them into action."

Lee has previously made mild criticisms of South Korea's participation in the trilateral military alliance with the US and Japan, falsely posturing as an opponent of war. He has subsequently backtracked, now calling this alliance an important aspect of the country's "national interest" and a "top priority."

He has pledged to boost military spending, including developing artificial intelligence for use in weaponry and improving military infrastructure. Last week, he sent a team to Washington for talks with the Trump

regime where they emphasized Lee's support for both the US-South Korea and US-South Korea-Japan military alliances.

Under the guise of winning “moderate voters,” Lee is making clear to the South Korean ruling class, as well as to Washington and Tokyo, that he will continue the pro-business and pro-war policies of his predecessors. Combined with his empty rhetoric about “respecting labor,” Lee is arguing that he is better positioned than his opponent Kim Moon-soo to implement the demands of big business while suppressing the class struggle.

Kim, the former labor minister in Yoon's cabinet, is a viciously anti-working-class figure. He has pledged to push through pro-business policies that include “improving labor productivity,” a euphemism for tearing up workers' job protections and other regulations on businesses. He also refused for months to distance himself from Yoon's martial law declaration, only offering an apology on Monday, in recognition of how widely-hated Yoon's government was.

Kim's campaign is already in turmoil. Over the weekend, the PPP leadership attempted to remove him as their candidate and replace him with Han Duck-soo, Yoon's prime minister, believing he would be a more popular alternative. The party membership voted down this move.

Han, who was not a member of the PPP until joining on Saturday, had declared his presidential candidacy as an independent. Though Kim won the primary, the party leadership attempted to force Kim to merge with Han's campaign, which the former refused to do. Han subsequently dropped out of the race and threw his support behind Kim.

Kim is associated with South Korea's far-right. He is aligned with the fascistic *Taegeukgi* rallies, which refers to the name of South Korea's flag. Participants in these mob-like demonstrations lack any broad support. However, they are being mobilized as part of a nascent fascist movement. They denounce their political opponents as “communists” and frequently call for the use of violence against them. According to the Democrats, a growing number of terrorist threats have been made against Lee Jae-myung, who was the target of an assassination attempt in January 2024.

Furthermore, this far-right layer is whipping up anti-China chauvinism and threatening Chinese nationals

living in South Korea, including those of Korean ethnicity. This has taken the form of street mobs and online harassment.

The far-right also accuses Lee Jae-myung of being “pro-China.” To the extent that Lee has previously called for better relations with Beijing, this has been in line with a section of the big business that enjoys close commercial ties with China. As tensions grow, fueled by the economic crisis in South Korea and the US-led war drive, Chinese residents and China more broadly are increasingly being made into scapegoats.

The campaigns being waged by all these candidates are of a pro-war and anti-working-class character. The next government will only shift further to the right and impose this growing crisis on workers through chauvinism, austerity, and the drive to war.



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