

South Korean presidential election: Democrat frontrunner's right-wing agenda

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South Korea is holding a presidential election June 3 to replace former president Yoon Suk-yeol, who was removed from office for imposing martial law in a failed coup attempt in December. The Democratic Party (DP) candidate Lee Jae-myung has capitalized on widespread anger towards Yoon and his People Power Party (PPP) to emerge as the strong frontrunner in the contest.

The DP and PPP are the two primary parties of big business in South Korea. The latter is a right-wing party historically associated with the military and past dictatorships. Its candidate is Kim Moon-soo, who served in Yoon's cabinet as labor minister and for months refused to distance himself from the failed martial law declaration.

The Democrats falsely posture as liberal and progressive. Under this guise, Lee signals to the ruling class that he is best able to prevent an explosion of working-class anger at a time of growing tensions internationally, driven above all by the coming to power of the fascist Trump regime in the United States.

Lee unsuccessfully sought the presidency in 2017, losing in the DP primary to Moon Jae-in. As the Democrat candidate in 2022, he narrowly lost the election to Yoon. After this, Lee won a seat in the National Assembly and became leader of his party.

Lee began his career as a human rights and labor lawyer before joining the Uri Party in 2005, a faction of the Democratic bloc led by then-President Noh Moo-hyun. Lee became mayor of Seongnam, a city just south of Seoul, from 2010 to 2018; and then governor of Gyeonggi Province from 2018 to 2021.

Lee has served as a phony “left” face for the Democratic Party, promising to implement welfare measures for the working class and to break up the family-owned conglomerates in South Korea—known as

chaebol—like Samsung and Hyundai Motors. Lee stated in 2016 he wanted to be a “successful Bernie Sanders,” comparing himself to the United States senator.

Like Sanders, Lee was never serious about what were milquetoast reforms to begin with. His goal was to convince workers and youth that a progressive wing existed within the capitalist Democratic Party, preventing them from breaking with the DP.

Lee uses his personal history to further the notion he will “respect labor” and understands the working class. He comes from a poor background and began working in factories at the age of 12, which led to injuries and permanent disabilities. Lee no doubt grew up in difficult circumstances, but this does not make him a champion of the working class.

With his rise in the party and his presidential campaign in 2022, Lee curtailed his phony “progressive” rhetoric and made clear that he represented no threat to the ruling elite. That year, Lee pledged to deregulate the economy in line with the demands of big business. His campaign this time is no different.

On May 8, Lee attended a meeting with major business lobbies that included the Federation of Korean Industries and the Korea Chamber of Commerce and Industry. He reassured them that he would allow major corporations to set his economic agenda, saying, “[A]t the center of the economic recovery are businesses. If you 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 also been holding meetings with leading officials from major companies including Samsung, Hyundai, SK and LG. In February, Lee declared while visiting a Hyundai Motors factory, “The growth of a corporation is ultimately everything for a country.”

Lee has also made clear he backs the US-led war drive against China. He stated in April in relation to Seoul's military alliances, "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." Earlier this month, Lee dispatched a team to Washington to reassure Trump that his election would not harm these alliances.

At the same time, Lee has continued to make empty populist pledges, such as implementing a 4.5-day workweek, from which he has already begun to retreat. After receiving corporate criticism over this proposal, Lee stated at his May 8 meeting with the business lobbies, "Are you worried it'd be implemented abruptly? There's no way I can do that."

Lee presents himself as the candidate who will end the danger of a revival of the insurrection started by Yoon Suk-yeol in league with sections of the military.

In reality, the Democratic Party, with the aid of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), demobilized the mass protests of millions against Yoon in December. The DP's goal was to stabilize the political situation by preventing the development of a movement of the working class that put forward class demands that went beyond the removal of Yoon and threatened bourgeois rule.

The Korea Enterprises Federation (KEF) directly appealed to the Democrats and labor unions on December 14 to end the protests, shortly after two million people demonstrated outside the National Assembly to demand Yoon's impeachment. "We also ask the labor community, as a responsible economic player in our society, to lend its support to efforts to stabilize society and overcome the economic crisis," the KEF stated.

Lee and the DP responded by presenting Yoon's initial suspension from office as a great victory for democracy, all but ensuring his removal from office in an impeachment trial, though this was not clear. Protests were rolled back and those that did take place were devoid of political content, turned into little more than music concerts. The KCTU, with Lee's intervention, shut down strikes.

Lee has also made appeals to past democracy movements to cover up his agenda. During a campaign

speech in Busan on May 14, Lee declared, "Is not Busan democracy's sacred ground? Isn't this the political hometown of Kim Young-sam, that fighter for democracy? Squarely judge (the PPP) this time as well."

Lee's invocation of the conservative Kim Young-sam, who was president from 1993 to 1998, is telling. During the 1970s and 1980s, Kim was one of the leaders of the Democratic bloc, which called for moderate political reforms. In 1987, facing strikes and mass protests, the dictatorship of Chun Doo-hwan and Noh Tae-woo agreed to direct elections for president. The Democrats were elevated into new positions of power and incorporated into the political establishment.

Kim quickly moved further to the right, founding a new party, the Democratic Liberal Party (later named the New Korea Party and forerunner of the PPP), along with Noh and Kim Jong-pil. The latter's résumé of political repression included being the first head of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency under dictator Park Chung-hee and then in the 1970s as Park's prime minister.

The Democrats as a whole embraced the former dictatorial regime, allowing these forces to remain in political power with a façade of "democratization."

During his presidency, Kim Young-sam oversaw the imposition of new anti-labor legislation and the suppression of the largest strike wave in the country's history that began in December 1996. Democrats Kim Dae-jung, president from 1998 to 2003, and Noh Moo-hyun, in office from 2003 to 2008, similarly pushed through widespread corporate restructuring that included mass layoffs and the casualization of the work force.

It was this Democratic Party to which Lee Jae-myung was drawn and rose to lead, whatever his childhood background or history as a labor lawyer. Neither he nor any section of the Democrats support the working class. If elected, he will impose austerity and pro-war measures in line with the demands of the ruling class.



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