

Democrat Lee Jae-myung wins South Korea's presidential election

Ben McGrath**4 June 2025**

Lee Jae-myung of the Democratic Party (DP) was elected as president of South Korea on Tuesday, defeating his primary challenger Kim Moon-soo of the People Power Party (PPP). Lee immediately began his five-year term on Wednesday.

Lee defeated Kim by more than 2.8 million votes, taking 49.42 percent of the total to the latter's 41.15 percent. Lee Jun-seok of the right-wing Reform Party took most of the remainder of the votes with 8.34 percent.

Tuesday's election was triggered by the removal of former president Yoon Suk-yeol of the PPP in April, following impeachment proceedings over his imposition of martial law in December. Voter turnout reached 79.4 percent, the highest in 28 years, driven by widespread anger towards Yoon and his party.

In his campaign, Lee Jae-myung promised to end the threat of insurrection represented by Yoon and his supporters in the military, as well as improve the economy.

He declared in his inaugural address on Wednesday, "It is time to restore security and peace, which have been reduced to tools of political strife; to rebuild livelihoods and the economy damaged by indifference, incompetence, and irresponsibility; and to revive democracy undermined by armored vehicles and automatic rifles."

The last remark was in reference to soldiers who stormed the National Assembly in an attempt to arrest lawmakers in December during Yoon's failed coup attempt.

Lee, however, will impose the demands of the ruling class no less ruthlessly than the PPP. The new president has no progressive solutions to any of the crises that grip South Korea, which include a stagnating economy worsened by Trump's trade war and Washington's accelerating militarization of the Indo-Pacific region.

In line with these US war plans aimed at China, Lee takes over South Korea's military preparations from

where Yoon left off. While the PPP openly embraces militarism, the Democrats attempt to posture as opponents of war. This is done along narrow, nationalist lines, focusing on encouraging "dialogue" with North Korea while consciously ignoring Washington's plans to goad Beijing into a conflict.

As throughout his campaign, Lee made clear to Washington and Tokyo on Wednesday that whatever his rhetoric about dialogue and peace, his administration will continue the trilateral military alliance with the US and Japan. Yoon sealed the agreement in August 2023 with former Japanese leader Fumio Kishida at the behest of US President Joe Biden.

Lee stated, "We will strengthen South Korea-US-Japan cooperation based on a solid South Korea-US alliance and approach relations with neighboring countries from the perspective of practicality and national interest."

In real terms, the strengthening of these alliances means South Korea's own rapid military escalation. This could include ramping up defense spending to 5 percent of GDP—a demand US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth issued during a warmongering speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore on May 31. For Seoul, which already spends about 2.8 percent on its armed forces, this would mean nearly doubling its military budget.

The government will extract this money from the working class at a time when the economy is already stagnating and workers face declining real wages and rising costs. The Bank of Korea (BOK) currently predicts the economy will expand by only 0.8 percent this year, in part due to uncertainty and instability produced by US tariffs, which the Trump regime is wielding like a cudgel to impose its demands on allies.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development has noted that the tariff rate on South Korean exports to the US has already risen from 1 percent to 16 percent, even without the 25 percent "reciprocal"

tariff that has been temporarily paused.

Lee's economic agenda includes plans for heavy investment in artificial intelligence (AI), which under capitalism will result in wage cuts and mass layoffs. A joint report published in February by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the BOK found that 27 percent of workers in the country were at risk of losing their jobs or having their wages slashed as a result of AI.

In removing Yoon from office rather than backing his coup attempt, the ruling class decided that it was not yet ready to dispense with the trappings of bourgeois democracy, above all out of fear of the mass popular opposition it would spark. At the height of the protests against Yoon in December, two million demonstrators gathered outside parliament to demand his removal from office.

However, the combination of war and austerity will lead to further opposition from the working class. That is why the ruling class has turned to the so-called "liberal" Democrats to impose its agenda, just as it has done in the past. The DP, which postures as a friend of workers, will work hand-in-hand with the trade unions, particularly the so-called "militant" Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), to suppress rising working-class resistance.

The KCTU hailed Lee's election saying, "Now is the time to realize the demands of worker citizens." It is promoting illusions that Lee will carry out pro-worker reforms, stating that his election was "the result of citizens' dedication and struggle," and falsely claiming that Lee's win was a victory for democracy.

The KCTU consciously ignores the broader international issues, including the danger of a US-led war against China, in order to obfuscate the real cause of the crisis workers face—the capitalist system itself. Workers are led to believe that simply removing Yoon will be enough to improve their conditions.

The unions, as well as social democrats, pseudo-left groups and various Stalinists that masquerade as left-wing, are part of the falsely named "progressive bloc" in South Korean politics. These groups have a long history of backing the Democrats and providing them with a "left" veneer as they attack the working class.

In the 1990s, the Democrats were first elevated to power, after the end of the country's military dictatorship, to block workers' demands and impose restructuring to save big business and the massive family-owned *chaebol* conglomerates that dominate South Korea's economy to this day. Under Kim Dae-jung and Noh Moo-hyun, the

Democrats enforced widespread layoffs and the mass casualization of the workforce, and relied on the KCTU to strangle strikes and protests.

In 2017, the Democrat Moon Jae-in came to power with the backing of the KCTU, which claimed that Moon would carry out genuine democratic reforms and even a "revolution." The unions and their progressive allies shut down the mass protests against the previous corrupt right-wing presidency of Park Geun-hye, who was also removed in an impeachment trial. Moon then oversaw the growth of inequality and the expansion of military cooperation with the US.

The KCTU played the same role after Yoon's coup attempt, calling off strikes and protests in December, claiming that the Democrats would defend democracy. In doing so, the DP and the KCTU provided Yoon Suk-yeol and the PPP with breathing room to recover, rally their right-wing supporters and promote the development of fascistic elements in the country.

Having long since been integrated into the political establishment as an ally of the Democrats and enjoying the privileges that come with it, the KCTU is far more terrified of the development of a working-class movement that goes beyond the confines of capitalism and the parliamentary system than of military dictatorship.

Whatever the claims of the Democrats and the trade unions, Lee's presidency does not represent a victory for democracy, nor will he implement progressive reforms. Like his predecessors, Lee's term in office will be marked by further immiseration of the working class and preparations for war.



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