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The Election That Could Reorder South Korea’s Politics

GI-WOOK SHIN

This year is one of elections and leadership changes throughout the Asia-Pacific region. Earlier in 2012, Taiwan reelected President Ma Ying-jeou to a second term. North Korea and Russia have already seen transfers of power this year; it will be China’s turn in the fall. The United States holds its presidential election in November. And South Korea will elect a president in December. Individually and collectively, these leadership changes hold crucial implications for Northeast Asian nations as well as the United States.

South Korea is holding two key elections in 2012. In April, Koreans chose all 300 members of their unicameral National Assembly, allowing the ruling conservatives, the New Frontier Party, to retain a slight majority. The presidential election to replace conservative incumbent Lee Myung-bak will be conducted December 19. (Lee is ineligible to seek reelection because South Korea’s constitution limits presidents to a single term of five years.)

The ruling party’s leading candidate for president is Park Geun-hye, the daughter of Park Chung-hee, the authoritarian president from 1963 to 1979 and father of Korea’s economic “miracle.” While the progressive main opposition party, the United Democratic Party (UDP), does not yet have as clear a frontrunner as Park, key contenders such as Moon Jae-in and Kim Du-kwan are closely associated with the late President Roh Moo-hyun. Another popular candidate is entrepreneur-turned-professor Ahn Cheol-soo; Ahn is likely to run as an independent.

Electing a new Korean president will not be simply a matter of changing the face at the nation’s helm. It will have far-reaching political and policy

ramifications, both domestic and foreign, perhaps greater than ever in recent history. While Korea’s macroeconomic performance has been quite good, especially compared with Japan and Europe’s, disparities between rich and poor have grown visibly in recent years. Social welfare will be a central issue during the campaign and thus for the incoming administration—the ruling and opposition parties are already sparring over it. South Korea will also have to deal with a nuclear North Korea while maintaining a robust alliance with the United States and seeking an appropriate balance with a rising China next door.

Whoever ends up occupying the Blue House (the head of state’s residence and office), the next president will likely move away from Lee’s hard-line approach to North Korea, which has seemingly failed to deter further provocations from Pyongyang. Yet the policy will vary considerably depending on whether a conservative or a progressive administration comes to power, a difference that may have major implications for South Korea’s relations with America and China.

APRIL SURPRISE

The results of the general election of April 2012 revealed not only the persistence of old currents but also the advent of new ones in Korean politics. Before the election, most observers anticipated a resounding victory for the progressive opposition parties. Only a few months earlier, the era of the then-ruling party, the conservative Grand National Party, appeared to be over. The GNP’s image had been marred by a series of political scandals leading to the resignation of the speaker of the National Assembly. However, under the leadership of Madam Park, the GNP successfully remodeled itself as the New Frontier (*Saenuri*) Party, winning 152 of the total 300 seats and far exceeding expect-

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tations. By contrast, the UDP was able to secure only 127 seats. Its humiliating defeat prompted the resignation of party head Han Myeong-sook.

What, then, caused this surprising development, and what larger political currents can we discern in the outcome of the general election?

First, the ruling party won the game of framing campaign issues. The opposition tried to turn the election into a referendum on the unpopular Lee administration, but the new ruling party leader, Park, had not held any major position in the administration and, in fact, was widely regarded as a force of opposition within the ruling party. Voters thus did not necessarily equate Lee with Park and her “new” Saenuri Party. For its part, the ruling party framed the election as a choice between a future leader (Park) and a bygone leader (Lee’s predecessor, the late President Roh, who governed from 2003 to 2008), since the leaders of the UDP had been Roh’s senior advisers.

The progressives made two other critical strategic mistakes. One was to bring two controversial issues—the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement and the construction of a naval base on the southern island of Jeju—to the fore early in the campaign. The signing of the trade pact and the new naval base (which opponents claim will be used by the United States) were denounced by UDP leaders such as Han Myeong-sook, Moon Jae-in, and Lee Hae-chan—but both projects were first pursued by the Roh administration, for which these very same leaders had worked. (Han and Lee had served as prime ministers under Roh, and Moon was his chief of staff.) Not surprisingly, many voters saw their denouncements as self-contradictory, and the ruling party attacked them not only for anti-Americanism and a weak sense of national security, but, most effectively, for hypocrisy and political opportunism.

The UDP also clouded the question of its own identity. With a base in the Honam region (North and South Cholla provinces), which has considerably fewer voters than the conservative base in Youngnam (North and South Kyongsang provinces), its leaders were anxious to enter into an electoral alliance with the left-wing United Progressive Party (UPP) to select a single progressive candidate in each of some key districts. To do so, the UDP accepted much of the UPP’s agenda, including opposition to the free trade agreement and Jeju Naval

Base. This leftward shift cost the UDP the support of many moderate voters and rallied conservatives in support of the ruling party.

More fundamental factors also shaped the election outcome—including regional voting patterns. The ruling party failed to elect a single member to the Assembly from the opposition stronghold in the southwestern Honam region. Only two of its candidates even came close to winning there. Meanwhile, the opposition gained only four seats in the ruling party’s base in the Youngnam region in the nation’s southeast. Such regional bifurcation has been a feature of Korean electoral outcomes for decades, but it was even stronger than usual in the 2012 election, reflecting increased political and policy polarization between the two main parties. As in the past, the parties more or less split the Seoul-Kyeonggi-Incheon metropolitan region as a whole, though the opposition fared better in the capital itself.

A new regional wrinkle in this election, however, was the role played by the Chungcheong and Kangwon provinces. Surprisingly, the ruling party won every seat in Kangwon province, which had elected the opposition party candidate as its governor the previous year. The sharp conservative turn among Kangwon voters was perhaps due to the opposition’s leftward shift. The ruling party also fared well in the Chungcheong region, winning 12 of 25 districts. Its improved performance there can be attributed to Park Geun-hye’s vocal personal support, in the face of President Lee’s early opposition, for the transfer of government ministries from Seoul to a new capital annex city in the area. The conservative party’s increased strength in these two areas has significantly improved Park’s prospects for winning the presidential election.

In addition, there was a huge turnover in parliament, with nearly half of all members winning election for the first time. This is not new to Korean politics, either. Koreans are highly demanding voters with a strong tradition of “kicking the bums out.” Unlike the United States, where nearly all congressional incumbents win reelection, incumbents in Korea’s relatively new democracy do not enjoy advantages over challengers, and the parties’ top-down leaderships seek to maximize their election prospects by replacing unexciting incumbents with fresh new candidates.

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On the other hand, very few independent candidates won Assembly seats: only three, compared with the twenty-five elected four years ago. This, too, reflected the polarization between the main conservative and progressive parties and the fierceness of the campaign.

Contrary to conventional wisdom about political apathy among youth, young people went to the polling stations in great numbers. Many were mobilized through the internet and social media, especially Twitter, as for the first time it became legal to urge people to vote using social media on election day itself. The effect was notable: Voter participation skyrocketed in the afternoon as celebrities and ordinary citizens alike posted encouraging messages and photos of themselves in the voting booth. Analysts predict that the number of Korean Twitter users will double by December to about 10 million, or one-fifth of the total population.

The impact of social networking services should not be exaggerated. While they were indeed effective in mobilizing young, educated voters in larger cities in the April election, their impact elsewhere was limited. Also, public opinion surveys have shown that voters skeptically filter the information provided by social media. Still, the generational difference in mobilization and voting patterns in Korea, while relatively new, is a phenomenon that is expected to persist.

PARK MOVES AHEAD

The ruling party's come-from-behind victory in April was certainly good news for Park. She proved her leadership abilities and confirmed her reputation as the "queen of elections." In the process, the leading conservative party has become her own. Park is no longer seen simply as a former president's daughter but as a politician in her own right. She is unlikely to face any major challenge to her nomination. Also, the fact that the ruling party was victorious in April in both Kangwon and Chungcheong, crucial swing-vote provinces, is encouraging for her prospects. Most post-election polls put Park ahead of all potential opponents, including Moon, the UDP's leading candidate, and Ahn, the independent.

Park has some causes for concern. First, she must do better among younger voters in Seoul if she is to win the election. In April, Seoulites in their 20s came out to vote in record numbers. Their 64.1 percent participation rate (compared to the overall rate of 54.3 percent) tilted Seoul heav-

ily in the opposition's favor. Second, data from the April election show that, nationwide, the progressive parties received slightly more votes by party than conservatives. (Koreans cast two votes for National Assembly members: one for a particular candidate, the other for a party. The two major conservative parties together received 9,819,069 party votes, while the two major progressive parties combined for 9,973,819.) Third, although Park has consolidated her position within the New Frontier Party, she must still overcome intra-party factionalism. And finally, the UDP defeat has created a sense of crisis among opposition forces, which may now work harder to ensure that only one progressive candidate is on the presidential ballot in December, as in the 2002 election.

Yet the opposition parties face even greater challenges. They lost an election that they were expected to win. Since UDP President Han stepped down to take responsibility for the defeat, the party has struggled with regional- and personality-based intra-party factionalism. The UPP, which did relatively well in April thanks to its collaboration with the UDP, is on the verge of a schism over ideological differences and charges of voting fraud. In the presidential election, the opposition's main challenge is fielding a viable candidate. Currently, the UDP's leading candidate in the polls is Moon. However, unlike Park, he had no "coattails" in his home region (Youngnam) in the National Assembly election, and this has cast doubt on his electability.

There are alternatives, notably Kim Du-kwan, the current governor of South Kyeongsang province, and Sohn Hak-kyu, a former party chairman and former governor of Kyeonggi province, but their popularity is low. For the UPP, the challenges are daunting: Prevent the dissolution of the party, restore internal order, and either put forward its own candidate or join the UDP in a unified ticket. (A UPP candidate would stand virtually no chance of election in any event, as the party is left of the national mainstream.)

The lack of a clear frontrunner among opposition candidates for president has created space for Ahn, the independent, who could prove a formidable opponent for Park. Ahn was originally a physician but became a successful entrepreneur and is now a professor at a top Korean university. Younger than many other candidates and not identified with existing parties, he is extremely popular among young people, for whom he holds an amorphous Obama-like post-partisan appeal. On

the other hand, Ahn has never stood for elected office and little is known about his policy preferences.

Ahn rose to popularity last summer as he contemplated running for the Seoul mayorship; ultimately, he chose not to and instead offered his support to an independent, Park Won-soon, helping to ensure Park's victory over a conservative candidate. Ahn clearly owes much of his popularity to widespread disenchantment with the political establishment rather than to any proven political leadership on his own part. For this reason, he is unlikely to run as a candidate of an existing party. If he does run, and most expect him to do so, he almost certainly will declare himself the "candidate of the citizens" but also seek UDP support.

At this point, the central question seems to be the number of major candidates in the election. Park is virtually certain to win a three-candidate race against a UDP candidate and Ahn, who would split the progressive and youth vote, but it is not clear that Park could defeat a single candidate of a unified opposition. Further clouding the forecast, it is not yet possible to rule out additional candidates on the right, who could split the conservative vote.

RISING INEQUALITY

As elsewhere, the economy is key to Korean elections. In the last campaign, Lee, a former Hyundai executive, declared he would be a "CEO president." Koreans elected him on the expectation that his business experience would enable him to manage the economy more effectively than the progressives. On this, however, his record has been mixed. On the one hand, South Korea has done better than most member states of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in recovering from the 2008–09 global financial crisis and ensuing recession. Korea was one of the few developed countries whose economy actually grew during the crisis, achieving a 6.2 percent rate in 2010, up sharply from 2.3 percent in 2008 and 0.3 percent in 2009. While Korea's growth rate declined to 3.4 percent in the final quarter of 2011, it still far exceeded the OECD average of 1.3 percent. Korea's exports increased by 19.6 percent in 2011, yielding a \$33.3 billion trade surplus.

On the other hand, South Korea has seen a sharp rise in economic and social disparities. One could argue that this growing inequality is not unique to Korea and that the country still has more equi-

table income distribution than most other nations. Yet Lee's "business-friendly" policy has been seen as benefiting only big business, at the expense of small and medium-sized companies, and as ignoring economic disparities and inadequate social welfare programs.

In this context, popular demand for increased social welfare spending has been on the rise. And politicians, on the left and the right, have not shied away from making big welfare promises. The potential presidential candidates have not announced concrete economic policies, but they are all sure to stress the need to expand welfare support, whether it be the "customized welfare" of the conservative ruling party or the "universal welfare" of the progressives. Demagoguery and populism are possible as potential candidates rush to make campaign promises for increased social spending while avoiding specifying where the money will come from.

BACK TO SUNSHINE?

North Korea is a lesser but still significant issue. In the last election, frustration with 10 years of a "Sunshine Policy" toward the North prompted some swing voters to support the conservative candidate. They charged the Kim Dae-jung and Roh administrations with "ladling" aid into North Korea in the naïve expectation that the totalitarian regime would abandon its nuclear weapons programs and otherwise improve its behavior. Conservative voters also felt that policy disputes with the United States over the North had created unnecessary tension with the South's major ally.

Reflecting such sentiments, the Lee government reversed course, conditioning most aid to North Korea on the regime's steps toward denuclearization while stressing the importance of the US alliance in dealing with Pyongyang. The North responded with a second nuclear weapons test in 2009 and a series of conventional military provocations in 2010, including the sinking of a South Korean military vessel (the *Cheonan*) and the shelling of a South Korean island (Yeonpyeong).

In local elections held only a few months after the *Cheonan* sinking, policy toward North Korea became a major campaign issue. In the past, such military provocations had usually worked in favor of the conservatives due to their tougher stance toward the North. This time, however, it lent momentum to progressive candidates, who positioned themselves as dedicated to preserving "peace" while accusing conservatives of stoking

tensions on the peninsula. Under the Lee administration, inter-Korean contacts have been practically frozen, and opinion polls show a majority of South Koreans favoring greater flexibility and efforts to improve relations, if not necessarily by returning to the policies of the Kim and Roh years.

Candidates in the December presidential election will be pressed to come up with a sensible North Korean policy, especially regarding how to improve inter-Korean relations and denuclearize the North. Making this issue still more important is North Korea's recent inauguration of a new leader, Kim Jong-un. Some observers expect that the North will try to influence the outcome of the election in the hope of dealing with a friendlier administration in the South, but what shape such interference might take and to what extent it might be effective rather than counterproductive are not clear.

As in the past, the qualifications of the candidates will be hotly debated, but this time even more so. Other than Park, the top candidates are political novices. The UDP's leading candidate, Moon, was a human rights lawyer before becoming a senior adviser to President Roh. He ran for public office for the first time in April to become a member of the National Assembly. Ahn, the independent, was trained as a medical doctor, but launched a small venture company (Ahn Lab) before taking his current teaching position at Seoul National University. He has never held any public office, elected or appointed.

By contrast, Park has a proven record of political leadership, rebuilding the GNP in 2003 and again this year. However, she has had no administrative experience. More important, she will have to confront the legacy of her father, the former dictator, who modernized the country but did so with an iron fist during his two-decade-long reign. Public opinion about him remains sharply divided—many Koreans revere him, others regard him as a tyrant. For his daughter, this legacy is a double-edged sword.

Finally, it will be interesting to see if South Korea breaks precedent and sends a female or an independent candidate to the Blue House. Korea has a long history of patriarchal Confucianism, and men dominate key positions in most sectors of society, including politics. However, the situation is slowly but noticeably changing. In the April elec-

tion, 47 of the 300 members of the National Assembly were women, a record high. It is also true that many Asian nations in which women's rights are not strong have already elected female leaders to their top posts, from Megawati Sukarnoputri of Indonesia to Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan to Gloria Macapagal Arroyo of the Philippines. Like Park, they are all daughters of former political leaders. Although gender is not likely to figure as the central issue in the campaign, Park's victory would certainly raise hope for greater and more active female participation in Korean society.

Similarly, the election of Ahn as an independent candidate would have a huge impact on Korean politics. Korea is a democratic country but one in which non-institutional politics that developed in the struggle for democratization remains important. Nongovernmental organizations, mostly on the left but increasingly also on the right, play an outsized role largely owing to an unstable and ineffective party system. In fact, all three major political parties (the New Frontier, UDP, and UPP) are nominally only a few months old, though they are the product of a remodeling of existing parties rather than genuinely new entities.

The electorate is disenchanting with the existing parties despite their new names, and this has contributed to Ahn's rising popularity.

His victory as a "citizens' candidate" would create an anomalous situation in which the president had no party of his own, possibly resulting in political instability and complicating his efforts to lead the nation.

DAUNTING TASKS

Whoever wins in December, the new administration will face the daunting task of growing the economy while responding to public pressure for expanded social welfare. This will be all the more challenging because Korea is experiencing significant demographic changes marked by a rapidly aging population and a declining fertility rate (at 1.24 children per woman, among the lowest rates in the world). In addition, the administration will be pushed to reform business conglomerate (*chaebol*) policies, promote small and medium-sized businesses, and mitigate social and economic disparities. But it will need to ensure that any reform of big business will not hurt Korea's competitiveness in the global market, thereby damaging the

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nation's economy as a whole. And, with severe fiscal problems in Europe, stagnation in Japan and the United States, and uncertainties in China, the new president may face a global economy as weak and volatile as Lee did within months of his inauguration in February 2008.

Crafting a credible North Korea policy will pose a major challenge as well. Whoever is elected, left or right, will attempt to repair strained ties with the North, but actual policy is expected to vary significantly depending on which candidate wins. Park likely would move toward the middle from the Lee government's current hard-line approach, but would continue to stress denuclearization and close collaboration with the United States. On the other hand, a UDP administration would reverse course, moving closer to the Sunshine Policy. There is even a chance that a new progressive administration would move to the left of the Sunshine Policy, as reflected in talk in Seoul these days of "engagement 2.0" and "thick engagement." Ahn's policy preference is largely unknown, but probably lies somewhere between these two poles.

Policy toward North Korea will affect South Korea's relations with the United States and China. The alliance with America has been, and remains, a cornerstone of South Korea's security and stability, but the rise of China has brought a new element into play in Korea's relations with the United States. With China continuing to exercise significant leverage over North Korea, and with China's trade with the South now more than that of the United States and Japan combined, it is becoming more challenging for South Korea to position itself between America and China, especially as the rivalry and tensions between the two increase. The Lee administration worked closely with Washington on its North Korea policy, but in doing so strained ties with Beijing. During the Roh administration, on the other hand, South Ko-

rea shared with China a similar approach toward North Korea, but policy disputes with the United States over the North raised tensions between the allies. A new Sunshine Policy could create similar tensions with Washington over how to deal with a nuclear North Korea.

Finally, while South Korea has made steady political progress since its democratic transition, the need for basic institutional reform is still debated. In particular, the public outcry against corruption continues to grow (some of President Lee's confidants, including his brother, have been arrested on corruption charges). Against this backdrop many experts call for a reduction in the power of the presidency so as to achieve a sounder balance of power among the three branches of government. Moreover, with the current single-term limit, the president often effectively becomes a lame duck within three years of taking office. Thus for years many have demanded a constitutional change that would both reduce presidential powers and allow for multiple terms. This debate over basic institutional arrangements may intensify during the upcoming presidential campaign.

More fundamentally, progressive and conservative Koreans are divided in their views of North Korea and the US alliance. This division is extremely difficult to bridge, going, as it does, beyond mere political and policy differences. Indeed, it is closely tied to individuals' sense of their identities as Koreans and as citizens of the Republic of Korea. In addition, regional division within South Korea and a generation gap between young and old make South Korean integration, not to mention North-South reconciliation, even more difficult. South Korea badly needs effective, consensus-oriented political leadership to overcome these bitter rifts and to take a future-oriented approach to the key policy issues of economic growth and equity, North Korea, and relations with the United States and China. ■