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THE PENINSULA

Implications of the South Korean General Elections for the “Sleeping Dragons”

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With the dust settling from the South Korean general election, which witnessed the highest voter turnout for a legislative election since 1992, the general consensus from both the left and the right is that the outcome was a significant setback for the ruling People Power Party (PPP) and by extension, President Yoon Suk Yeol. For the first time since the establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948, the main opposition party took over half of the seats in the National Assembly, with the broader opposition sweeping 192 seats out of the total 300 seats that were up for contestation. The underwhelming results for the ruling party have caused the Yoon administration to become the first government in the country's constitutional history to have an opposition-controlled legislature throughout . With the opposition renewing calls for special prosecutions that the president had previously vetoed and some even threatening his impeachment, President Yoon's unfavorable political circumstances have given new life to speculations regarding the potential successors well-positioned to become contenders in South Korea's next presidential election.

Political Aspirants Who Gained Momentum From the Elections

Lee Jae-myung

Democratic Party (DP) leader Lee Jae-myung comfortably defended his seat by fending off his challenger, potential presidential contender Won Hee-ryong. He achieved this feat even while fulfilling his obligations as party leader and campaigning extensively for fellow DP candidates across the country. Lee, however, faced several obstacles in the run-up to the election. First, he narrowly avoided imprisonment last September due to allegations that could have inflicted irreparable damage on his political career. Second, he was the victim of a knife attack on January 2, which threatened to throw a party grappling with dissension in its ranks into further disarray with the general election only two months away. Third, his sidelining of other factions in the party nomination process raised fears of a revolt by dissatisfied lawmakers, eliciting criticisms even from party bigwigs and being blamed as the reason for the PPP overtaking the DP in approval ratings for the first time in six months. Lastly, his refusal to withdraw Kim Jun-hyeok and Yang Mun-seok as nominees despite the controversies surrounding them, which emerged in late March, sparked concerns of an upset on April 10.

Despite this, Lee's election-day victory has strengthened his standing within the party. In what was seen as a demonstration of Lee's expanded influence, a close associate of his was elected as DP floor leader of the National Assembly while running as the sole candidate, the first time this has happened in the DP since 2005. Lee also possesses what is arguably the strongest fandom in South Korean politics today, which is known as the self-dubbed "daughters of reform" and came to prominence in the run-up to the 2022 presidential election. Initially, a grouping of primarily women in their 20s and 30s who appears to have rallied behind Lee during the presidential election in response to the growing support by their male counterparts for the PPP led by the supposedly gender-baiting Lee Jun-seok, the group has since been perceived as having moved beyond its original support base to include

But all is not smooth sailing for Lee going forward. Multiple court hearings lie ahead for him regarding various criminal allegations, including charges that he provided unlawful favors to a private investor while serving as mayor of Seongnam and charges that he asked a business to make illegal transfers to North Korea during his tenure as governor of Gyeonggi Province. If found guilty, the charges could potentially cost him his seat as well as any second bid for president. However, it is uncertain how long the court will deliberate on a verdict, with some suggesting it may take upwards of one year. For Lee, the major foreseeable challenge will be to beat these charges against him while sustaining the party's momentum from the National Assembly elections.

Cho Kuk

The most surprising story of this election was arguably the victory of Cho Kuk. His 38-day-old Rebuilding Korea Party took 12 seats in the National Assembly – the best performance by a true third party since 2016, considering the two parties that outperformed his in proportional voting were satellites created by the two main parties for this election. Also remarkable was his party's victory in the progressive stronghold of Honam, where it outperformed the DP's satellite party in the proportional vote.

The disgraced former justice minister under the previous Moon Jae-in administration threw his hat in the ring in February. Cho took the political scene by storm by gaining the support of the progressive-leaning "4050 generation," who comprise the largest segment of the South Korean electorate at 37.5 percent. Cho's party touched upon that segment's

dissatisfaction with the president by campaigning with the slogan “three years is too long,” a reference to President Yoon’s remaining time in office that some have interpreted as a call for Yoon’s impeachment.

Cho’s history with the president has its roots in 2019 when then Prosecutor-General Yoon, who was appointed by President Moon, launched an investigation into then Justice Minister Cho and his family amid the government’s pursuit of prosecution reform. The case prompted large-scale protests in Seoul from both sides of the political spectrum, pitting those supportive of the Moon administration’s reforms against supporters of the conservative opposition who seemingly embraced Yoon’s cause. Importantly, the affair tarnished Cho’s image as a progressive reformer, particularly among South Koreans in their 20s,

Having been found guilty of these charges by a lower court in February 2023, Cho hinted at an election bid last November as a means of “recovering [his] honor via a nonlegal path.” However, with his former DP colleagues distancing themselves from his cause, Cho launched his own party in February with a renewed call for prosecution reform. This election victory has served as a vindication of sorts for Cho, although his party still failed to secure the requisite 20 seats necessary to form a floor negotiation group, which denies a larger platform for his party.

Another positive result is that the election has made Cho a presidential contender overnight, with him polling first in a recent public survey that asked participants which lawmaker’s performance they were looking forward to the most. In the aftermath of the election, Cho has been busy working to boost his party’s profile, engaging sympathetic DP figures to try to secure floor-negotiation-group status and differentiating his party from the DP. However, Cho is not free of his legal troubles, and the upcoming Supreme Court ruling in his case may put him behind bars and cost him both his seat and a presidential run. In a recent development, DP Representative Min Hyeong-bae suggested that the opposition might seek a special prosecution on Cho’s case as well, as grounds for doing so.

Lee Jun-seok

Also making a comeback is the “young” conservative Lee Jun-seok, whose victory in the Hwaseong B district on a third-party ticket served as one of the biggest upsets of this election. The 39-year-old Lee successfully ran for a seat in the “semiconductor belt” in a constituency with the youngest average age in Korea at 34.7 years. Lee’s victory was noteworthy considering he had trailed the frontrunner, the DP’s Kong Young-woon, by more than 23 percentage points in the first opinion poll of the race.

This is not Lee Jun-seok’s first time in the political spotlight. Considered one of the “Park Geun-hye kids,” Lee was recruited by the former president in 2011 at the age of 26 to join the conservative party’s emergency committee, from the beginning of his political career. In 2021, Lee was the star of his own “storm” when he was elected as the youngest leader of a major political party in modern Korean history. In that position, he led the PPP to the election victories of President Yoon and Seoul Mayor Oh Se-hoon and was hailed as a future presidential contender. However, a rocky relationship with Yoon that began well prior to Yoon’s election, along with discontent within the party regarding his supposed “ill manners” that had even earlier roots, ultimately led him to exit the party last December and pursue a third-party path.

Launching the big-tent New Reform Party the next month, there was initial speculation that he might stir up a second “storm.” However, such views fizzled out with the ascent of Han Dong-hoon, a failure to entice further PPP defections, the botched merger with Lee Nak-yeon, and the return of Cho Kuk, which all arrested the party’s momentum. Despite this, Lee demonstrated his political savviness and re-captivated the public with a campaign that included visiting all 100 apartment complexes in his constituency and campaigning for 48 hours without sleep, which handed him his first victory in his fourth attempt at a seat.

His achievement as the sole third-party candidate to win a district seat in the Greater Seoul Metropolitan Area, along with his party’s securing of two additional seats, has resurrected his political fortune and rekindled speculations of a future presidential run. The media has continued to paint him as a conservative “young blood,” although Lee has ruled out a return to the PPP, setting his sights on expanding his party’s support base through the local elections in 2026. Seen by some as a polarizing figure, Lee enjoys a strong following among men in their 20s. It remains to be seen if he can replicate his success at the national level with his third-party platform by reaching beyond his traditional support base and whether that will be a sturdy enough launching pad for greater aspirations.

Political Figures with a Diminished Outlook

Han Dong-hoon

One possible contender whose fortune took a turn for the worse was Han Dong-hoon. The PPP interim leader ended his 107-day run as leader in a subdued fashion with a brief press event the day after the election, accepting responsibility for the defeat and relinquishing his post. Despite a dearth of political experience, Han had been touted as a future presidential candidate from as early as April 2022 given his close association with then President-Elect Yoon.

Han’s affiliation with Yoon goes back to 2003, during which the two worked together at the Supreme Prosecutors’ Office’s Central Investigation Department on several high-profile cases, including the successful prosecutions of the heads of SK and Hyundai. They later teamed up in the special prosecution team that investigated President Park Geun-hye and Samsung’s Lee Jae-yong, earning Han the moniker of “chaebol grim reaper.” When Yoon became Prosecutor-General in 2019, he promoted Han as the youngest chief prosecutor in the history of the organization to head the Prosecution Service’s anti-corruption department, and Han spearheaded the investigation on then Justice Minister Cho Kuk. In 2022, newly elected President Yoon appointed Han to his cabinet as the first Minister of Justice of his administration.

Han made a name for himself as justice minister through his verbal jousts with opposition lawmakers, and he took over the reins of the ruling party last December as it was struggling to recover from its defeat in the *Gangseo District Office* by-election. Although there were initial signs of a potential break with the president, Han put speculations to rest and quickly found his stride on the campaign trail. Unfortunately for the ruling party, his message of “passing judgment on the opposition” rang hollow to an electorate more interested in “punishing the administration.” Han has come under vicious criticism from his own party for the defeat, and there are questions as to whether he remains in the president’s good graces. Newly elected Cho Kuk has even called for a special prosecution against Han to investigate allegations involving his family. While some question his future

as a politician, the “K-pop idol-esque popularity” that Han has accumulated over the past two years suggests that it may be premature to rule out his return to the political spotlight. Barring the unforeseeable, a more pertinent question may be what form his eventual return would take: whether it is by reconciling with the president and taking another appointment within the government or through a more self-reliant path via a leadership role in the PPP.

Won Hee-ryong

Another PPP presidential contender who saw his political fortunes reversed was Won Hee-ryong, former governor of Jeju Province and the first transport minister under the Yoon administration. Won’s ambitious bid for the DP stronghold of Incheon’s Gyeyang B District ended unsuccessfully, with DP leader Lee Jae-myung emerging victorious in what some have dubbed a possible preview of the next presidential race. The three-term lawmaker drew praise from conservatives for turning down opportunities for a district-seat nomination in an easier constituency and seeking a seat in “difficult territory” by taking on the opposition leader. In the final counting, he took 45.45 percent of the vote, roughly matching the performance of his PPP predecessor in the same district, who had garnered 44.76 percent in 2020.

Inducted into the conservative party by Lee Hoi-chang in 1999 as a member of the “young bloods” to counteract the DP’s “386 generation,” Won was seen as one of the young reformist figures within the conservative party. Since then, he has emerged as a heavyweight within the party’s ranks and has long been considered a potential presidential candidate. Having established himself as one of the two most visible figures in Yoon’s cabinet along with Han Dong-hoon, some argue that his run in this election has further boosted his status within the PPP. Unfortunately for Won, he now faces the uphill task of maintaining his relevance as a presidential contender in the minds of the Korean electorate without the platform afforded by a lawmaker’s seat. Also working against him are allegations of his involvement during his tenure as transport minister in the rerouting of the Yangpyeong Highway, one of the issues that the opposition is calling for a special prosecution on. All is not gloom for Won, however, and a return to the forefront may be sooner than expected for him as he polled second in a recent survey asking who should be the next leader of the PPP.

Lee Nak-yon

The election was not without its disappointments for opposition heavyweights. Former Prime Minister Lee Nak-yon’s third-party bid concluded with him trailing the incumbent DP candidate by more than 62 percentage points. Having begun his political career in 2000 as a member of the DP’s predecessor, the Millennium Democratic Party, Lee left the DP in January due to disagreements with Lee Jae-myung regarding his management of the DP. The tense relationship between the two heavyweights goes back to at least 2021, when the two vied for the DP’s presidential nomination for the 2022 election. Until mid-2020, Lee Nak-yon had been widely considered the likely candidate to succeed Moon Jae-in as president, but a series of hiccups led to him being overtaken in popularity by Lee Jae-myung as the DP’s frontrunner, resulting in the latter’s selection as the party’s presidential candidate for the election.

In starting his new party, there were indications that Lee Nak-yon was aiming for more than just a grouping for DP defectors, but that he would form a big-tent party by incorporating other third-party factions outside of the two dominant political parties. However, the New Future Party that Lee co-founded with other former DP lawmakers struggled to establish itself, first failing to attract key lawmakers from the DP despite mounting signs of unrest from within its ranks and then mishandling a much-anticipated merger with former PPP leader Lee Jun-seok's New Reform Party. Together, these setbacks effectively stalled his party's momentum as a leading third-party voice. His party lost in the election, including , where the five-term lawmaker was defeated by the DP's single-term lawmaker Min Hyeong-bae. The defeat was a significant blow to the once-presidential frontrunner, and some have suggested that an uncertain future likely awaits him, with the victor Min hinting in a post-election interview that "it won't be easy" for Lee to rejoin the DP. It bears watching whether a return to his longtime party and reconciliation with Lee Jae-myung is in the cards for the veteran Lee or whether he will persist on his third-party path and continue reaching out to those not fully submissive to Lee Jae-myung.

Other contenders

With three years remaining until the next presidential election, politicians benefiting from strong tailwinds following the 2024 general election face an unusually long runway if they are to emerge as potential contenders. In fact, Yoon's successor may just as easily emerge from potential presidential frontrunners who were not seeking a seat in this general election or may even be individuals not currently known to the mainstream public. Seoul Mayor Oh Se-hoon of the PPP watched from the sidelines as his party secured just 11 out of the 48 seats up for grabs in Seoul. Daegu Mayor Hong Joon-pyo had a more positive view from the sidelines, watching his party sweep all 12 of the available seats in his municipality. The leadership vacuum in the PPP created by the electoral defeat means that both mayors have seen their positions within the party strengthened along with their chances for a presidential run.

Among DP presidential aspirants, Governor Kim Dong-yeon of Gyeonggi Province received a boost through this election, as 53 out of the 60 seats being contested in the province were won by his party, consolidating DP control over South Korea's most populous province. Kim's prospects are complicated, however, as the general election has further entrenched the position of his party's leader Lee Jae-myung and as Cho Kuk has emerged as a progressive figurehead.

These three regional heads have been receiving their share of the media's attention in the aftermath of the general election alongside the candidates mentioned above, and eyes will be on where the three head next after their terms expire in 2026 and with the presidential election scheduled the following year. South Korean politics, however, has demonstrated time and again a propensity for surprise. If the past is any indication, then the sudden entrance of another prominent contender cannot be ruled out. For now, it remains to be seen what the next three years will have in store for South Korea.

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