

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نباشد تن من مباد بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

Author: [Konstantin Asmolov](#)

06.05.2024

South Korea's 2024 Parliamentary Elections.

It's Not Over Yet...

On April 10, South Korea held elections for members of the 22nd National Assembly, with the leading opposition Democratic Party retaining its majority in parliament.

The final outcome is as follows:

- The Democratic Party led by Lee Jae-myung and its satellite Democratic Alliance won 175 seats (161 by constituency and 14 by proportional representation);
- Rebuilding Korea Party led by former Minister of Justice Cho Kuk, where representatives of other factions of the Democratic Party, mainly Moonists, moved to, won another 12 seats by proportional representation;
- The ruling Conservative People Power and its satellite People Future won 108 mandates (90 and 18);
- Lee Jun-seok's center-right Reform Party won 3 mandates (1 and 2);
- The center-left New Future and the left-wing Progressive Party won one seat each by constituency.
- Representatives of the left-wing Green Justice Party and independent candidates failed to get into parliament.

The total score was thus 187:108 in favor of the Democratic camp. The media described the election outcome as a confident and crushing victory for the opposition, but when compared to the 2020 election, where the score was 180:103 in favor of the Conservatives, the Democrats rather maintained their position, and even lost a little without Cho Kuk. Rather, the Conservatives failed to deprive the Democrats of a qualified majority of half of the

mandates, and the Democrats did not gain two-thirds, after which they could have impeached the president. As they say, ‘they held their ground.’

Can the election have an “aftertaste that turns into civil unrest”? At the time the author is writing these lines, neither the president and his entourage, nor the leadership of the Conservative Party, are trying to raise the topic of election interference or electoral irregularities.

What’s behind this election outcome?

What’s behind the Democrats’ victory is the question, because in 2020 Moon’s apparent victory in the war against the coronavirus (or rather, the first wave of four) coincided with blatantly failed strategic planning by the then-conservative leadership led by Hwang Kyo-ahn.

The first reason for the Democrats’ victory was the protest factor and President Yoon Suk-yeol’s low approval rating, which has been hovering around 30-40% for the past year. The society remains highly divided, and the elections were perceived as a vote of (no) confidence in the president’s course.

The protest factor, meanwhile, outweighed a number of weights on the Democrats’ scale, including Lee Jae-myung’s own odious reputation and a number of unsavory scandals involving his associates. And the fact that the number of lawmakers with criminal records was much higher for the Democrats than for the Conservatives. And the way in which the Democrats strengthened ‘party unity’ by turning the party into a support club for Lee Jae-myung. All of this has been overshadowed.

Especially since Yoon Suk-yeol, like Park Geun-hye, did not have his own media: the well-known English-language newspaper, the Korea Times, was more likely to play into Lee Jung-seok’s hands, and there were also plenty of scandals that hurt the government.

The first and longest-running scandal concerns the way to treat the allegation that First Lady Kim Keon-hee received a luxury Christian Dior bag worth about 3 million won (\$2,200) as a gift in September 2022. The pastor who handed it to her and was considered a family friend secretly filmed her taking the bag with a camera hidden in his watch.

Another potential electoral factor is the public reaction to strikes by resident doctors and trainees protesting the government’s plans to increase enrollment in medical schools.

Another scandal involved former Minister of Defense Lee Jong-sup, who was sent as ambassador to Australia even though he was being held as a possible figure in an investigation into the death of a marine who had died in a flood. Lee’s mission abroad was

perceived by the opposition and the media as ‘the authorities are covering up’. Although Lee eventually resigned, the scandal left a bitter aftertaste.

The second factor is that the leaders of the Democratic camp were fighting for their lives in the true sense of the word. It is worth recalling that Lee Jae-myung is a key figure in several criminal cases, and he is separated from the defendant’s bench by five corpses of key witnesses. And Cho Kuk is the man whose corruption investigation made prosecutor general Yoon Suk-yeol, who put two conservative presidents behind bars, the president from the Conservative Party. If the People Power won, the likelihood of Lee and Cho being prosecuted would become more serious.

It is necessary to pay tribute to Lee Jae-myung. As part of strengthening the party’s unity, he not only got rid of a potential fifth column that had left the DPK, but also brought in a few ‘old top guns’ to help, as former Prime Minister Kim Boo-kyum was the chief strategist of the election campaign.

As the danger of a Conservative victory was also high for Moon Jae-in, the two groups put up a united front, and Cho Kuk, realizing that with his reputation he was unlikely to attract single-mandate deputies, successfully built up the party-list voting. As a result, although the Conservative satellite won in absolute numbers, the Democrats’ satellite and Cho Kuk together gained more, repeating the story of 4 years ago with the tragedy of small parties.

The third factor concerns the third force, whose entry into politics once again did not happen: the Reform Party and New Future failed to get the required number of votes. While Lee Jun-seok managed to become a lawmaker, Lee Nak-yon, who ran in his home province of Jeolla, where he even won the primary against Lee Jae-myung, lost to the Democratic candidate by a landslide.

Reaction of the authorities

The losing side ritually apologized. Prime Minister Han Duck-soo, Presidential Chief of Staff Lee Kwan-seop and most senior presidential secretaries offered to resign to take responsibility for the defeat. The head of the Conservatives, Han Dong-hoon, did the same.

As for the president, [Yoon Suk-yeol made a statement](#) on the election outcome at a cabinet meeting on April 16, saying he humbly accepts the result of the people’s will and pledging to listen more carefully to people’s opinions and take a modest and flexible stance. Yoon Suk-yeol said, “[I, as the president, am at fault first.](#)” Yoon pledged to “step closer to the people and delve more deeply into people’s livelihoods” but indicated that he had no intention of backtracking on his plans and would continue to “pursue the three major reforms in labor,

education and pensions, as well as medical reform, while paying closer attention to rational opinions.”

Of course, the opposition and its controlled media pounced on Yoon from right and left, demanding a review of his management of public affairs and better relations with the National Assembly. They say, “Yoon failed to demonstrate sincerity and remorse, even in the wake of a resounding loss in the recent elections.” ”Relying on presidential vetoes and persistently refusing to meet with the main opposition party leader or hold press conferences will not be a sustainable strategy.” the Korea Times wrote.

Prospects for the development of the situation

In the current National Assembly, 41% of the bills proposed by the government were rejected. This is the lowest approval rate for government proposals in history. But the upcoming parliament is rather likely to surpass it. The new parliament has virtually no politicians in its ranks who are not associated with the current confrontation between the Conservatives and the Democrats and is intent on fighting factional warfare.

Even more harshly than before, the Democrats will deflect Yoon’s appointees and his legislative initiatives, while passing bills through parliament aimed at annoying the president, including attempts of ‘special investigations’, against the president’s wife, the Conservative Party leader, etc. Yoon Suk-yeol will apparently continue to veto them, becoming the president who has used this tool more often than any other president of the Sixth Republic.

All this, of course, will very much hamper the real efficiency of the state system, but the Democrats will use any failures of the government to raise maximum hype about it, demanding investigations and impeachments. In the meantime, according to a Gallup Korea poll conducted from April 16 to 18, only 23% of the country’s residents approve of Yoon Suk-yeol as president. That’s down 11% from last week and the lowest level of support since he took office in May 2022.

Do the Democrats have a chance of getting two-thirds? So far, Democrats cannot override a presidential veto, change the constitution or declare impeachment, but the slightest rift in the Conservative camp could give them that opportunity. Before the election, however, both Democrats and Conservatives conducted a sort of purge of the ranks, through which opponents of the general line either lost their opportunity to run as candidates or went on their own; but as noted above, of the new parties, only Moon’s supporters won enough seats.

Do the Conservatives have a chance of regaining the majority? Oddly enough, yes. The odiousness of Lee Jae-myung and Cho Kuk has not gone away, and they are still involved in criminal cases. The authorities did not intend to tighten the screws on this issue before the

election, but if the investigation does find enough evidence to convict Lee Jae-myung and Cho Kuk, it will not only be a blow to the Democratic camp as a whole, but also provoke an internal party crisis. [We have devoted many articles to Lee's criminal cases](#), and Cho Kuk faces potential jail time after the Supreme Court's final verdict in the fraud case. If [the sentence is approved, Cho will lose his seat in parliament](#); his informal deputy Hwang Un-ha, who risks losing his seat in parliament because he was sentenced to prison for violating the election law, has a similar problem.

As the Korea Times wrote, "[voters empowered certain politicians and parties with huge support. However, they can just as quickly withdraw their support if they believe the elected officials fail to live up to their expectations.](#)"

How will the situation affect the country's foreign or domestic policy? It is clear that Yoon Suk-yeol's attempts to nullify Moon's legacy and reform health care, education and labor unions are likely to fail due to parliamentary resistance. Here, Yoon Suk-yeol can partly be considered a 'lame duck' in terms of limited influence, but the presidential veto remains in his hands.

More interesting is the issue of foreign policy, as the parliament has less leverage, and it is worth keeping in mind that in terms of shared values, the Democrats are no less U.S.-centric than the Conservatives. This is about the orientation towards the collective West, not the Republicans or the Democrats themselves, so that disagreements between Seoul and Washington on specific issues can be tactical, but not strategic. In addition, [Kim Joon-hyung, former chancellor of the Korea National Diplomatic Academy during Moon Jae-in's reign, told the Korea Times](#), "Yoon will stick to his current diplomatic philosophy because national security is an area where the president can fully exercise his power."

There are two opposing options. On the one hand, feeling domestic political insecurity and listening to the opposition, Yoon will reduce the pace of integration into the Washington-Tokyo-Seoul triangle because of the anti-Japanese mindset of 'the people.' The opposition urges the president to remain neutral on issues related to the Taiwan Strait and Ukraine, worrying about possible diplomatic conflicts with neighboring superpowers, but this position is more determined by the logic of factional confrontation: the author remembers well how, during the presidential election, Lee Jae-myung was more supportive of Ukraine than Yoon and called for drowning Chinese poachers in the territorial waters without proceedings.

But it is more likely that Yoon will try to compensate for domestic political problems with what he will consider foreign policy successes. Especially since the intensification of the anti-North Korean line may allow him to use the foreign policy situation to tighten the screws at

home against pro-North Korean forces. Given that one of the cases in which Lee Jae-myung is potentially involved concerns the smuggling of money into North Korea, and there has been some progress, this could turn into a North Korean trail.

As for Seoul's relations with Beijing or Moscow, the previous trend is likely to continue: while solidarizing with the U.S. on the anti-North Korean track, Seoul is trying to ensure itself as much free hand as possible in the current situation on the Russian and Chinese issues. The goal of the ROK, in the words of Russian Ambassador to the Republic of Korea Georgy Zinoviev, is to remain 'the friendliest' of unfriendly nations.

But in this case too, there is a chance that, taking advantage of Yoon's precarious position at home, Washington will increase pressure and demands to pursue a more anti-Russian course. All the more so since populism and the logic of factional struggle make the Democrats declare a more pronounced position in favor of Kiev, similar to the European 'left-wing', so one should not expect that the change of power and its transition to the Democrats will lead to an improvement of relations between Russia and the ROK.

So the confrontation is not over yet. The Democrats have won a clear victory, but this victory is far from allowing them to change the direction of the country's politics. The parties held their ground and retained arguments for the next series of confrontations.

Thus, the audience is invited to get comfortable in their seats and stock up on popcorn. The unfolding series of 'South Korean domestic politics' is wrapping up another season, but the next one will be just as exciting and there may be many unexpected twists and turns to come.

05.05.2024

Konstantin Asmolov, Candidate of Historical Sciences, Leading Research Fellow at the Center for Korean Studies of the Institute of China and Modern Asia of the Russian Academy of Sciences, exclusively for the online magazine "New Eastern Outlook"