



South Korea: Voting for Change by Peter M. Beck

Recent National Assembly elections laid bare both the strengths and weaknesses of South Korean democracy. Korea proved once again to be one of most dynamic democracies in the world, but unless both lawmakers and citizens confront shortcomings in the election rules and political parties, Korea's first-world economy will be dragged down by third-world politics. Voters in Seoul and surrounding areas are diverse and increasingly sophisticated, but election returns in the provinces are a throwback to the Three Kingdoms period – regionalism still reigns.

The sea change in the fortunes of Korea's liberals and conservatives in the ballot was nothing short of breathtaking. Former President Roh Moo-hyun can add to his legacy the decimation of his political party. Perhaps Roh was being prescient last year when he described two impressive leaders of his party, Chung Dong-young and Kim Keun-tae, as "unfit to run a hole-in-the-wall shop." They both lost their seats. To go from a slight majority of 152 seats in 2004 to a party that feels "fortunate" to maintain just over half that number (81) four years later with a different name would be unimaginable in the United States. Even if the Republicans get creamed for a second time this fall after losing 30 seats in the House in 2006, they will lose far fewer seats in a much larger legislature.

Interestingly, the real winner was not President Lee Myung-bak's Grand National Party (GNP), which carved out a slight majority of 153 seats, but won less than half of the seats lost by the liberals. The true winner was Park Geun-hye, whose support will be critical for passing constitutional revisions. The award for the most ridiculous name for a political party goes to the "Pro-Park Geun-hye Alliance," a reminder that fiefdoms are alive and well in Korea. However, this still may be preferable to an entourage pretending to be a national party, like Lee Hoi-chang's Liberal Development Party. Both "parties" represent rather questionable checks on President Lee.

On the plus side, this will likely be the most international National Assembly ever. At least 12 percent of the winners have advanced degrees from abroad. In Seoul, over 20 percent of members attended a university in the United States. This means there will be more members who are alumni of Harvard and Oxford than Chungang and Hanguk University of Foreign Studies. These members should serve the country well in Korea's quest to internationalize.

The fact that personalities and regionalism trumped issues as the decisive factors in the election remains one of Korea's biggest political defects. I had hoped that the passing of the three Kims (Young-sam, Dae-jung, and Jong-pil) from the political scene would see boss politics give way to a national politics, but it is as if they never left. The ruling GNP won a

total of one seat in four (out of Korea's eight) provinces. If this is the best the party can do after 10 years, shouldn't they take "National" out of their name? In Korean, the GNP is called the One Country Party, but perhaps it should be the Half Country Party! Unfortunately, while the 54 national constituency seats helped elect more women (including a 30-year-old, beating the U.S. record by eight years!), proportional representation undermines formation of large national parties.

This election was also notable for the utter lack of policy issues that resonated with voters. While there was a clear repudiation of the liberal policies of the past 10 years, it was disconcerting to see the "North Wind" and "Impeachment Wind" replaced by "no wind." North Korea's Kim Jong-il all but jumped up and down, screaming and yelling to get South Korean voters to pay attention by kicking out government officers in Kaeseong and test-firing short-range missiles, but voters didn't pay attention. I am not sure how much of this phenomenon is due to growing sophistication and how much this is due to unhealthy levels of indifference and selfishness.

Almost as disturbing as the chronic Balkanization of Korean politics is the fact that voter turnout sank to an all-time low of 46 percent. While several points higher than the percentage of Americans who vote in Congressional elections, we still go to work on election day. An efficient and cost-effective way of increasing voter turnout without "forcing" people to vote would be to make presidential, National Assembly and/or local elections concurrent, giving voters more "reasons" to vote.

Instead of pursuing white elephants like the grand canal project, President Lee should work with other parties to seek a constitutional revision to create a four-year, single renewable term presidency and align it with the National Assembly's term. One of my many disappointments with President Roh was his half-hearted effort to do this late in his tenure. Concurrent elections would not only save time and money, they would also help avoid divided government. It will be 20 years until the two elections are less than a year apart again. The possibility of reelection would also reduce the lame duck period that presidents face toward the end of their terms.

Finally, it is time that South Korea's roughly 2 million overseas citizens be allowed to cast absentee ballots. No advanced country should disenfranchise such a large segment of its population. The Constitutional Court ruled last summer that the absentee election law is unconstitutional and must be revised by the end of this year.

A National Assembly in which conservatives outnumber liberals 2-1 should be friendly toward President Lee, but he must first help his party heal the wounds of an acrimonious nomination process. He will also have to resist the temptation to cross the line between strong and heavy-handed leadership.

If he can do that, his presidency just might have the happy ending that has eluded his predecessors.

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