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Frustration Defines the South Korean Electorate
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For outsiders, ROK President Lee Myung-bak has had a good run. During his four and a half years in office, the South Korean economy weathered the Great Recession and rebounded to mark impressive growth. Seoul seized the international spotlight, hosting several global summits. The impressive reach of ROK corporations and the popularity of the "Hallyu Wave" have made "Global Korea" more than just a PR slogan. Yet, despite these impressive accomplishments, President Lee's approval ratings continue to slide. Indeed, the key word in the upcoming elections – South Korea holds a parliamentary ballot April 11 – is "frustration."

On paper, Lee's track record is positive. The ROK economy grew every year on his watch, and Korea was one of the few countries to avoid recession when the global financial crisis hit. It quickly recovered to expand 6.2 percent in 2010, although that blistering pace faltered last year. While South Korea has the world's 14th largest economy, it is the 9th largest trading country and total trade volume last year topped $1 trillion, making it the ninth country to reach that landmark.

President Lee has also raised Seoul's international profile, hosting the first Asian G20 meeting in November 2010 and the second Nuclear Security Summit last month. He has built a relationship with US President Barack Obama that is second to none: Obama has visited Seoul more than any other foreign capital, and the US-ROK alliance is now, says Mr. Obama, "the linchpin of not only security for the Republic of Korea and the United States but also for the Pacific as a whole…"

And yet as the country enters the election season, Lee has been vilified and leading South Korean conservatives have distanced themselves from the Lee administration. Recent opinion polls show the president with a 26 percent approval rating while 58 percent disapprove of him.

One word seems to sum up the national mood: frustration. This frustration is evident in calls from the left to renounce the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement (KORUS), the second largest free trade agreement in history. What is most remarkable is that the agreement was negotiated by the progressive government of former President Roh Moo-hyun, which shared the orientation of those now denouncing it. Opposition to the deal is driven by campaign politics, veiled as economic nationalism, an anti-market mentality, and irritation that critics have not been able to derail a process that they launched.

A similar sentiment is evident in thinking about South Korean defense and security policy. In the aftermath of the incidents of 2010 – the sinking of the ROK Navy corvette Cheonan and the shelling of Yeongpyeong Island – South Koreans have been increasingly frustrated by their government's inability to deter North Korean provocations; they feel they have ceded the initiative to Pyongyang and can only respond to its misbehavior. This has resulted in the articulation of a new defense policy – proactive deterrence– that is designed to prepare the Seoul government to quickly strike back at North Korea and hopefully deter and prevent it from provoking the ROK again. The public's sense of frustration is palpable in opinion polls that show nearly 70 percent of South Koreans support the reintroduction of US tactical nuclear weapons to their country or the development of an indigenous nuclear capability. The most compelling explanation for these results, given high levels of support for the US-ROK alliance, is that South Koreans are desperate to find ways to alter the North Korean strategic calculus, and are frustrated that their options are so limited.

Frustration is driving protests against China as well. The immediate issue is Beijing's continuing repatriation of North Korean defectors on its territory, rather than recognizing them as genuine refugees, which would give them the right to go on to South Korea. That position revives the anger directed at China when Beijing refused to back the ROK after the sinking of the Cheonan, and fuels complaints that China's support for Pyongyang is frustrating attempts to moderate North Korean behavior and is making reunification more difficult. Increasing Chinese investment in North Korea is criticized for turning the North into the 19th province of China as well as robbing South Korea of what it considers 'its' resources.

On one level, frustration is business as usual in South Korea: politics in Korea is a free-fire zone in which there is no premium on compromise. In this zero-sum world, anger and frustration are to be expected. That feeling is reinforced by the perennial South Korean insecurity that it remains – despite all its accomplishments – "a shrimp among whales."

This year, two new elements magnify these enduring complaints. The first is a deepening generational divide in South Korea. A half-century ago Korea was a poor country, recovering from the devastation of war. Koreans sacrificed to create 'the miracle on the Han River.' Despite the hardships of the 1960s and '70s, there was the belief that life would slowly but inexorably improve. And it did. Today's young South Koreans inhabit a different world. Wealth and the boom of telecommunication technology have raised this generation's expectations – they want more and they want it faster. Equipped with smart phones and social networking services (SNS), they are quick to express their displeasures and they expect instant gratification.

Politicians in Korea have tried to keep pace with this new electorate; most politicians actively participate in SNS

activities, interacting more with the public than ever before. But for all their efforts, innovative change has not come easily for the older generation of politicians, accustomed to government-driven change. As a result discourse has been pushed to extremes as political parties try to demonstrate sympathy with rising frustration; moderate positions are rarely the answer to a spreading sense of unease.

Last year's Seoul mayoral election illustrates both the mounting frustration and the growing generational divide. That election ostensibly turned on 'pocketbook' issues – in particular whether all families would qualify for free school lunches or just those with low-incomes. That debate revealed growing distaste in Seoul for the perceived lack of economic opportunity and income gaps that are thought to be growing too large. Many Koreans dismiss the economic successes of the Lee administration as favoring export-driven national growth at the expense of ordinary Koreans. The election of independent candidate Wonsoon Park and the emergence of Cheolsoo Ahn as a major political actor and possible presidential candidate reflect the public's disgust with existing political parties and its desire for rapid change.

Outsiders should recognize that while vitriol is often directed at foreign targets, most of the angry rhetoric in Korea is in response to frustration over these domestic issues. The US-ROK alliance and the bilateral partnership loom large in the lives of Koreans, but criticism of the US isn't necessarily anti-Americanism. The driving forces of the complaint are internal. At the same time, however, the US should make every effort to ensure that its policies don't become an issue in upcoming elections. That doesn't mean backing down when addressing the numerous contentious issues in the bilateral relationship, but it does mean being sensitive to Korean concerns and not adding fuel to the fire.

Koreans must understand that merely channeling frustration isn't leadership. Instead, politicians must develop and articulate a comprehensive view of national priorities, both domestic and international, and use that as the basis of their political programs. As part of this process, political actors must also learn the art of compromise. There are no quick fixes or simple solutions to the problems that Korea faces today.

The outcome of this year's elections in the ROK and the US will have significant implications for the bilateral relationship, but perspective is needed too. Radical platforms will command attention, but we must put them in context: as in the US, Korean politicians often pander to their bases before tacking to the center. Moderate views are likely to prevail: frustration is seldom coupled with a comprehensive understanding of the complexities of foreign policy. Koreans and outsiders would be wise to understand the frustration that is widespread in Korea, dampen its impact, and ensure that it doesn't derail a vital partnership.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.