



**WHAT YOON SEOK-YUL'S ELECTION
MEANS FOR MINORITY RIGHTS IN
SOUTH KOREA**

BY EUN A JO

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Yoon Seok-yul's election generated two different kinds of responses: one marked by self-congratulation and another by resignation. Those who subscribed to the former saw the peaceful transfer of power, evident in Yoon's opponent Lee Jae-myung's swift [concession](#), as a sign of the country's democratic health. Those who fell in the latter category found much to be [dismayed](#) by Yoon's victory and the Trumpian politics he symbolized.

Both views contain truths. South Korea did not suffer the kind of contentious aftermath that one saw, for instance, in the United States following the 2016 election. Yet Yoon's campaign—though perfectly legal—capitalized on the country's uglier impulses. If this election suggested resilience of South Korea's democratic institutions, it also revealed the limitations of its democratic culture.

This "[democratic ceiling](#)" has important implications for how the country under Yoon's leadership might treat its under-represented populations, including women and other social minorities. Yoon's callousness—even if merely rhetorical at this point—is dangerous, because it can fuel a culture of neglect that undercuts the institutional maturity of South Korea's nascent anti-discrimination regime.

A democratic ceiling

Discrimination against women in South Korea has continued *in spite of* institutional protections, which suggests problems of enforcement rather than provision. From the Sexual Equality Employment Act (1987), Women's Development Act (1995), to the Prevention of Domestic Violence and Protection of Victim Act (1997), South Korea has advanced legal mechanisms to promote and protect gender equality. Yet, these laws have had limited impact in ensuring equal treatment of women at work, on which South Korea [ranks the lowest](#) among OECD countries; closing gender pay gaps, of which South Korea [maintains a striking 31.5%](#); and curtailing gender-based violence, on which South Korean courts have remained notoriously [lenient](#). Cultural barriers—from the victim's stigma to the double standards of law enforcement—have undermined institutional mechanisms for addressing gender inequity.

Even so, Yoon has repeatedly [stated](#) that structural discrimination based on gender does not exist in South Korea. During the campaign, he made a controversial promise to abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, tasked with tackling gendered inequities mentioned above; instead, he [accused](#) the officials of treating men as "potential sex criminals." At the same time, Yoon [blamed](#) feminism for the country's low birth rates, claiming that it "prevents healthy relations between men and women." Such misogynistic narratives bode ill for a much-needed policy reappraisal on the social and economic status of women in South Korean society.

The situation is even more bleak when it comes to members of the LGBTQ community and migrant workers, for whom there are fewer institutional protections. Besides the Military Criminal Act (1962), which outlaws sexual acts among soldiers regardless of consent, Yoon's stance on LGBTQ rights has been one of willful silence. Meanwhile, despite the provisions of the Multicultural Families Support Act (2008), migrant workers and their families have little to no concrete recourse when faced with discriminatory treatment. Migrant women—especially foreign-born brides who come to South Korea through brokered marriages—have suffered

greatly as a result, with limited social networks and access to redress.

In this context, Yoon's rhetoric may also impede efforts to further institutionalize anti-discrimination initiatives. So far, he has made only ambiguous commitments to recognizing the right to choose sexual orientation, [citing](#) the "social impact" of "denying biologically assigned genders." Tactless comments can be also found about migrant workers; in one social media post, Yoon [pledged](#) to "resolve the issue of foreigners laying their spoon on a dinner table set by Koreans." These queer-intolerant and ethno-nationalist narratives may exacerbate demands for more exclusive policies among his socially conservative constituents.

To be fair, Yoon has not been dismissive of all minority rights issues. He has made a welcome pledge to implement the North Korean Human Rights Act (2016), which would advance the livelihoods of North Korean refugees. The law seeks, among other things, to secure the safety of defectors and support South Korean civil society organizations working to raise awareness of human rights conditions in the North. Both courses of action could have direct and indirect impacts on the welfare of North Korean refugees in their journey to, and resettlement in, South Korea.

Yet, selective efforts to advance defector rights—disconnected from a broader anti-discrimination agenda—may generate charges of hypocrisy. The plight of North Korean refugees has been the subject of growing policy incoherence as it became increasingly [politicized](#) of late. Sadly, as long as it remains a tool of partisan politicking, progress on North Korean refugee policy will likely be superficial and transitory.

A policy reversal?

It is unclear to what extent Yoon's narratives will bind him to exclusionary policies [in practice](#). What appears more certain is that these narratives have awakened and mobilized previously silent forces that do support such policies and will want Yoon to keep his promises. Unless he is willing to make a dramatic policy reversal—apart from his campaign narratives—the

future seems inhospitable for the advancement of minority rights in South Korea.

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