



Elections in South Korea Assessing Park's Victory

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In December 2012, South Korea elected Park Geun-hye of the conservative Saenuri [New Frontier] Party, as the first woman president, with an absolute majority. Park is the daughter of former divisive military strongman from South Korea's authoritarian era of Park Chung-hee.

Park won with an absolute majority over her rival Moon Jae-in of the United Democratic Party (DUP), the first president to do so in the 41 years since her father in the 1971 election with 53.2 percent against challenger Kim Dae-jung.

2012 ELECTIONS: FEW HIGHLIGHTS

Park's victory marks the "victory of the hopes of the public to overcome crisis and revive the economy". Park had a lead in opinion polls but suffered a slump when software tycoon Ahn Cheol-soo declared his independent bid for the presidency. It was only when Ahn pulled out of the race that her fortunes revived. Some opinion polls placed Moon ahead among younger voters, but her strategy of targeting voters in their 40s and focusing her canvassing in the Seoul metropolitan area paid off handsomely. Park fared better than expected in the capital, garnering 48.18 percent of the votes in Seoul against Moon's 51.42 percent.

It is the second presidential win in a row for the Saenuri Party, which despite the declining popularity of the Lee Myung-bak administration won both the April general election and the presidential election. Park remained in the lead from the beginning of vote count over her rival Moon's UDP and within the next three hours it transpired that she was the clear winner. Voter turnout stood at a substantial 75.8 percent, the highest since the 1997 presidential election which

saw a turnout of 80.7 percent.

Park's victory shattered a number of jinxes that had dogged previous presidential elections. The first is that a higher turnout means a defeat for the conservative candidate. Since the 1997 presidential election, progressive candidates won all elections where the turnout was over 70 percent. In 1997, when the turnout was 80.7 percent, Kim Dae-jung beat Lee Hoi-chang. In the following election, Roh Moo-hyun beat Lee Hoi-chang with turnout at 70.8 percent. But in 2007, when Lee Myung-bak triumphed over Chung Dong-young, the turnout was a mere 63 percent. But this time, although the turnout was surprisingly high at 75.8 percent, Park prevailed, chiefly because she was able to galvanize massive turnout from older voters while young people were uninspired by challenger Moon Jae-in.

Secondly, it has been a rule of a thumb that losing Seoul means losing in the election. Since 1997, no candidate who lost in Seoul managed to win overall. In 1997, Kim earned 44.87 percent of the votes in Seoul and beat Lee Hoi-chang, who garnered only 40.89 percent. In 2002, Roh won Seoul with 51.3 percent over Lee Hoi-chang's 44.95 percent. Five years later, Lee Myung-bak scored 53.23 percent in Seoul, securing a comfortable lead over Chung's 24.5 percent. Yet Park lost to Moon in Seoul with 48.18 percent to 51.42 percent but won the country.

Park also broke the jinx that losing among the voters in their 40s spells defeat. The exit polls of the three major broadcasters showed Park at 44.1 percent among those in their 40s, a solid 11.5 percent behind Moon's 55.6 percent. But Park's fervent older following easily made up for it. But



other jinxes remain. Losing in North Chungcheong Province meant a defeat in this year's presidential election as well, as it had in all six presidential elections since 1987. Park won 56.22 percent in the province, way ahead of Moon's 43.26 percent. That there is never an upset victory also remained true. In a poll by Media Research for the Chosun Ilbo on November 24-25, 2012 Park had 43.5 percent of support, 3.6 points ahead of Moon's 39.9 percent.

II NORTH KOREA & 2012 ELECTIONS: CHALLENGES AHEAD

The choice between Park and liberal Moon looked tough for the voters as both candidates steered away from Lee's policies, including, most strikingly, his hard-line stance on North Korea. Ultimately Park emerged as the winner. The voters fondly remember her father, Park Chung-hee, dictator for 18 years until his intelligence chief killed him during a drinking party in 1979. Much of 60-year-old Park's public persona is built on her close association with her father's rule. When she was 22 her mother died in a botched attempt to assassinate her father, and she stood in as first lady for five years until her father's death. She has created an image as a selfless daughter of Korea, never married, then a female lawmaker in a male-dominated political world. Understandably, after Moon conceded defeat, Park said that she would dedicate herself to uniting her people and improving their livelihoods. Park is to take office on February 25, 2013 when Lee ends his single five-year term.

After five years of high tension under incumbent Lee Myung-bak, Park has vowed to pursue engagement and step up aid to North Korea, despite the latter's widely condemned long-range rocket launch on 12 December 2012. In a nationally televised speech, Park said "the North's long-range missile launch symbolically showed how grave our security reality is," but pledged to work with regional partners for greater peace. She also promised to try "to work for greater reconciliation, cooperation and peace in

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Northeast Asia based on correct perception of history", in an apparent reference to simmering conflict with Tokyo over their colonial past. It may be recalled that Japan colonised Korea for 35 years and has a conflict over a claim on an island. South Korea also says there has not been an adequate apology for forced sexual slavery of Korean women during its occupation.

North Korean state media, however, repeatedly questioned the sincerity of Park's North Korea engagement policy, since she and Lee are from the same conservative party. Ties between the two Koreas plummeted during Lee's term. Many voters believed Lee's policies drove North Korea to renew nuclear and missile tests and to launch two attacks in 2010 that killed 50 Koreans. The rocket launch, which Park's party called a test of banned ballistic missile technology, made North Korea an issue in the closing days of campaigning, although many voters said they cared more about the economy.

In the beginning, the dividing line in pursuing South Korea's policy towards North Korea by Park and Moon looked blurred as the degree of engagement they would pursue with the North was not clear. Moon had proposed unconditional engagement and restoration of economic aid to the North and also pledged to hold an inter-Korean summit within his first year in office. In contrast, Park, whose mother was killed in 1974 by a North Korean gunman aiming for her father, had insisted that Pyongyang meet its prior commitments to denuclearize as a prerequisite to major infrastructure assistance. Scott Snyder says that though "Park's approach offers front-end economic benefits to the North and promotes the need for inter-Korean dialogue, her conditional approach to denuclearization is conceptually similar to the current policy embraced by both Seoul and Washington".

Though President Barack Obama may not oppose a renewed South Korean attempt to improve ties with Pyongyang, he would expect the Park administration to carefully coordinate so that the current efforts to punish the North for its violations of UN resolutions are maintained. The moot point is if North Korea would be interested in a true engagement that will involve an increase in genuine mutual dependence and move towards denuclearization process. Irrespective of the South Korea government's policy towards North Korea, South Korean public remains divided on what kind of policy the South should pursue.

III US, CHINA & SOUTH KOREA

How does the US, South Korea's major ally, view

Park's victory? For The US, Park's victory was more of a relief, as Park's liberal rival Moon had pledged unconditional engagement and economic assistance with North Korea, a policy at odds with the US, which has about 28,500 troops stationed in South Korea as a deterrent against aggression by the North. The US believed that a win by Moon would have complicated bilateral coordination on a range of issues, not the least of which was North Korea. Following the recent successful rocket test, North Korea has moved a step closer to the day when it will have a credible international ballistic missile capability and deliverable nuclear weapons.

As North Korea continues to flex its military muscle, prospects of international talks aimed at dismantling its nuclear weapons arsenal appear more challenging. Amid the failure of the previous diplomatic efforts to block Pyongyang's determined effort to become a de facto nuclear weapon state, the task is cut out for Park for engaging Pyongyang in cooperation with regional powers and the US to strive for peace in the region.

The Six-Party Talks remains suspended after North Korea walked out in December 2009. China, North Korea's main economic benefactor and ally, is not in agreement always with the US. Pyongyang continues to flout United Nations Security Council resolutions with impunity and China has resisted US-led moves to impose new sanctions. With Park in office, the US feels comfortable in defining its North Korea strategy, as Moon who was an ex-chief of staff to Lee's predecessor, the late President Roh Moo-hyun, known to have championed the "sunshine policy" of no-springs-attached aid for Pyongyang.

North Korea's successful rocket launch viewed and condemned by most of the world as a disguised missile test and that violated UN Security Council resolutions stemming from the illegal nuclear tests in 2006 and 2009, could have hurt the progressive camp's chances as the voters felt that Moon's return would mean a return to the proactive engagement policies of previous progressive presidents. Therefore, with Park at the helm, US-South Korea relations will see more consolidation and coordination of policies in the likely event of more provocations by North.

IV CHALLENGES AHEAD

By becoming the first female president, Park also

Park's legacy is clearly an advantage and she is likely to capitalize. Even while being deprived the fruits of democracy then, South Koreans have huge respect for the economic accomplishments of Park Chung-hee, her father, who in the 1960s and 1970s presided with an authoritarian hand over one of the modern world's greatest economic turnarounds.

became the first elected female leader anywhere in the Confucian civilization, which consists of China, Japan, North and South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Vietnam, and makes up nearly a quarter of the world's population. However, her mark in history will not be determined by gender alone but would depend on how successfully she addresses the greatest moral challenge to the Korean nation: alleviating the tremendous suffering of fellow Koreans in North Korea, who are perhaps the most systematically oppressed people in the world today because of its own folly. By cracking the citadel of masculinity and triumphing over her opponents, Park has emerged as a role model for hundreds of millions of women across East Asia.

Her legacy is clearly an advantage and she is likely to capitalize on this. Even while being deprived the fruits of democracy then, South Koreans have huge respect for the economic accomplishments of Park Chung-hee, her father, who in the 1960s and 1970s presided with an authoritarian hand over one of the modern world's greatest economic turnarounds. Under his stewardship, South Korea eradicated abject poverty and mass hunger, and laid the groundwork for becoming an industrialized leader in global trade.

Among the promises Park made during the campaign, further expansion of the economy, rebuilding the middle class by creating jobs and restructuring the economy, lowering college tuition and expanding child care and other social welfare programs endeared the voters. She also promised to put stricter controls on the family-run massive conglomerates known as chaebol. These looked to be modest goals and therefore achievable. In contrast, parties on the left proposed more drastic reforms and more generous programs, which raised skepticism, something similar to the Democratic Party of Japan's promises in 2009 but failed to honour,

thereby got a drubbing on December 16 elections.

At the hindsight, it might appear economic health and social welfare are already in place in an affluent country such as South Korea and therefore Park has not got much to do on that front. But then Park does remember why the people still remember and honour her father even today despite his authoritarian rule. Park Chung-hee, like other Korean leaders before and since, was able to define the most compelling national task of his time and accomplish it and Park is drawing lesson from her father's policy of rebuilding the country.

The first modern leader who is revered in Korea was Kim Ku for leading Koreans in their struggle for independence during and after the peninsula's occupation by Japan in the first half of the 20th century. Later, in the decades when Park Chung-hee was in charge, reconstruction and economic development in the wake of the Korean War remained South Korea's most compelling national challenge. In the 1980s and 1990s, the central task was nurturing the seeds of democracy — the work for which former President Kim Dae-jung, a champion of popular government and human rights, is still admired despite his questionable policy of giving North Korea unconditional aid, including hundreds of millions of dollars in cash.

Today, the single greatest calling for the ethnic Korean nation is liberating the North Korean people. For more than 60 years, North Koreans have languished in the shadow of a vast network of gulags. They are denied the most basic liberties, such as freedom of speech, thought, religion, assembly and movement. North Korea is unique among the world's modern literate, industrialized, urbanized economies to have suffered a peacetime famine. It was a man-made disaster that claimed about 10 percent of the population in the mid- to late 1990s. There is a greater need now to improve the conditions of life inside North Korea. It is a calling that none of Park Geun-hye's predecessors have attempted to answer, even though South Korea claims, in its Constitution, to be the sole legitimate government representing all Koreans. Park has acknowledged that she would not remain wanting to achieve this. It remains to be seen what her strategies would be in the next five years when she remains in office. After all, it is the people in both the Koreas, who remain the main actors in a unified Korea, if unification is

achieved.

As a change, Park has said she would try to prevent the forcible repatriation of North Koreans and would strengthen "the resettlement support program and tailored support system for North Korean defectors," so that "each one of them may maximize their talents to their full potential." Once she takes office in February, her challenge will be to keep faith with such pledges. So far, no South Korean leader has made North Korean human rights a priority. None have ever called for North Korea to dismantle its concentration camps for political prisoners, nor have any met in public with North Korean defectors, for fear of provoking the leadership in Pyongyang.

The New York Times in an op-ed article observed that today, as it was 60 years ago, "the argument for calling on the North to tear down the camps and provide the North Korean people with information about the outside world is compelling. After all, a nation cannot remain half slave and half free, and the danger of doing so only increases with each year that the political and economic contrasts between the two halves of Korea increase". It further argued that "Park should strive to raise global and local awareness about North Korean human rights abuses. For example, she could generously increase funding for radio broadcasts and other information transmissions into North Korea; sponsor publications and international conventions on the subject; and greatly expand programs that support resettlement of North Koreans in South Korea".

Such efforts may not yield visible results in the near term. On the contrary, they are likely to bring periods of impasse and tension in intra-Korean relations. But even if there is a decline in summit pageantry and diplomatic deals, these measures would achieve what really matters: they would encourage North Koreans to learn more about the outside world and demand, if only gradually, more from their leaders. Even modest progress on the protection of rights as basic as the right to life itself, and freedom from enslavement, or freedom of expression and assembly, would change North Korean lives for the better. And if such changes helped to deliver hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of fellow Koreans from bondage, they would give Park a legacy that no leader over the past two millenniums of Korean history can yet claim.

