

Prospects for the 2012 Presidential Election in South Korea

Smart Q&A No. 2012-11

July 11, 2012

Interviewee

Han Wool Jeong

With only a couple of months left until the 2012 presidential election in South Korea, there are many predications on how the race will turn out. Currently, Park Geun-hye of the ruling Saenuri or New Frontier Party (NFP) and Moon Jae-in of the opposition Democratic United Party have announced their bids for president, while the popular political outsider Ahn Cheol-soo has yet to declare whether he will run for office. At the same time, a number of political scandals on vote rigging and pro-North Korea politicians among the opposition have become some of the major issues in the buildup to the presidential election. Mr. Han Wool Jeong of the EAI's Center for Public Opinion Research discussed on the current political situation and offered his prospects on the candidates, parties, and agendas that will play an important role in the next administration.

Q1: How has public opinion changed following the 2012 general elections?

A1: "The polls on political affiliation have recently been shifting, with fewer people identifying themselves as 'progressives.' However, such results seem to reflect more a temporary change rather than a permanent one. Also, while the Pro-North Korea controversy may temporarily hurt the opposition, the continuous bashing on the issue by the ruling party could possibly bring about a backlash against it."

- Since the general elections on April 11, 2012, support for the ruling NFP and Park Geun-hye has been steadily on the rise, while support for opposition party candidates has been diminishing. This reflects a clear shift in the ideological mood in South Korea. Throughout the Lee Myung-bak administration, EAI polls have shown a consistent ratio among the ideological preferences of voters, with 35-40% identifying themselves as "moderate," 30% as "conservative," and about 25% as "progressive." However, according to the latest poll conducted by the EAI on May 28-29, 2012, less than 20% registered as "progressive," indicating a possible break in the consistent ratio of voters' political identification
- It would be wrong to conclude that this political change is a permanent, fundamental one. In fact, this shift may be a result of temporary fluctuations following recent events, such as the poor performance of the opposition parties in the 2012 general elections, alleged vote rigging, and the pro-North Korea controversy. If the political situation changes, it is highly probable that the even balance between those who identify themselves as moderate, conservative, or progressive will emerge again.

This product presents a policy-oriented summary of the Smart Q&A.

The East Asia Institute
909 Sampoong B/D
158 Eulji-ro Jung-gu
Seoul 100-786
Republic of Korea

© EAI 2012

www.eai.or.kr

- The recent controversy over pro-North Korea politicians in the National Assembly has had a negative impact on the opposition and led to a boost in support for the ruling party. For a long time, public opinion polls have shown people to be more supportive of progressive policies toward North Korea, such as favoring the Sunshine Policy rather than the Lee Myung-bak administration's more conservative approach. This changed following the sinking of the *Cheonan* and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island when polls showed a shift toward more hard-line policies. Given this background, the pro-North Korea controversy and the possibility of vote rigging has irked public sentiment, further unifying conservatives and creating divisions among progressives. The moderates have expressed wariness on the issue.
- It is unknown whether this state of affairs will continue. Particularly since the pro-North Korea controversy was addressed not by civil society but by politicians of the ruling party. This issue has now degenerated into conservatives pressuring progressives to reveal a list of pro-North Korea politicians. Such a long drawn-out process could possibly hurt the ruling party as well, particularly if the public perceives that the controversy is being used as a political tool by NFP members to garner support. The NFP and Park Geun-hye were only able to gain more popularity due to the party's self-correcting efforts which successfully secured the support of moderate voters. Excessive attacks on the opposition parties over the pro-North controversy may actually push moderates against the NFP, disrupting the hard-won efforts by Park Geun-hye to amass moderate supporters. In the run-up to the presidential election, it will be important to keep a close eye on the potential impact of the pro-North Korea controversy.

Q2. What can we expect with the 2012 presidential election?

A2: "The 2012 general elections reflected a balance between the ruling and opposition parties rather than an ascendancy of one or the other. It is expected that, once the leadership gap in the opposition party is filled, checks and balances between the two parties will once again be in effect."

- Although Park Geun-hye was trailing behind Ahn Chul-Soo in the polls before the 2012 general elections, a recent poll suggests that Park has once again taken the lead, supporting the "Park dominance" trend.
- The result of the presidential election in 2007 reflected a collapse in the balance of power between the two opposition parties. At that time the public showed overwhelming support for the Grand National Party (now NFP) after expressing disappointment with the then opposition Uri Party. However, the current political situation is one in which the ruling party and the opposition are neck-and-neck. Although the NFP outnumbered the opposition with National Assembly seats because of the single-member district system, the results of the party-proportional representation vote reflects a more equal balance: NFP leads by 42.8%, while the Democratic United Party has 36.5%, and the Unified Progressive Party 10.3%. Considering this fact, there is no guarantee that the NFP and Park Geun-hye will maintain the same kind of dominance in the presidential election as they did in the general elections.
- Park Geun-hye was able to increase her popular support due to the successful self-correcting efforts she orchestrated within the ruling party and the poor performance of the opposition. The NFP's change in the party's name, efforts to deal with corrupt practices, and the introduction of social welfare policies helped to defy the prediction that it would experience a crushing defeat in the 2012 general elections. This shows that Park Geun-hye's remarkable efforts to rebuild the party, as the provisional chairwoman of the party in the run-up to the elections, had a positive effect on her increasing popularity. However, we must consider that the ruling party's dominance comes from

the fact that the opposition party has yet to field a presidential candidate. Although the actual economic sentiment of the people is negative and corruption in politics has heightened public unease toward the government, the opposition has not been able to capitalize on this. Rather it has too often been involved in politically-damaging incidents such as rigged candidate nominations, mishandling the issue of illegal surveillance of civilians, and in general has not shown strong leadership after its poor show in the general elections. Therefore, it is very likely that once the leadership of the opposition party has been established; there will be a tight battle between the two candidates.

Q3: Going by the public opinion polls what should the next administration focus on?

A3: "The next administration should focus on alleviating economic polarization in society. There also needs to be policies put in place to increase social welfare and will then improve the quality of life for the public. Political reform is also crucial. Lastly, issues related to North Korea and national security will be important which means the political experience of the candidates will count."

- It is hard to predict which agenda will be the main focus for the next administration. The agendas are not simply selected based on poll results, but on which issues the candidates choose to focus on, and how the public responds to such decisions. Currently, as there no official candidates, it is difficult to predict the agenda. However, the poll results on the current administration can be an indicator of the kind of issues that the public will expect to be more thoroughly dealt with during the next administration.
- The economy is one the main areas that must be addressed. According to recent polls on the current administration, economic polarization and negative economic sentiment among voters are the two biggest issues that the public will expect the future administration to deal with. Recently, the public has focused on not only economic polarization but also on the pursuit of a better quality of life. The issue of social welfare has been highlighted as the public now expects an expanded and more effective system of social welfare programs. The public also hopes for the high economic growth rates experienced decades ago. This reflects a desire among voters for wide-ranging policies to improve the South Korean economy.
- Political reform is also very crucial. This was highlighted when Ahn Cheol-soo entered the Seoul mayoral race in 2011 as an independent candidate. The immense popularity he received compared to candidates from the main parties show the public desire for reform of Korean politics as well as a distrust of mainstream politicians. If the presidential candidates are unable to put forward a vision for the future outlook of South Korean politics, they will not garner enough support to win the election. Whereas past political reforms have highlighted the need to improve political institutions, reforms these days focus less on the institution and more on the politics itself. Efforts must then target self-improvement and self-reform among the political establishment. The political party that is able to show such efforts will have a strong advantage in the election.
- Although national security issues have not always featured so highly in presidential debates, it is expected to be different for the upcoming election. With inter-Korean relations in a stalemate, a changing international environment, and the issue of pro-North Korea politicians, North Korea is likely to be of concern for voters. In this case, the potential opposition candidates, such as Ahn Cheol -soo and Moon Jae-in will be vulnerable as they are often brought up on for their lack of political experience. It will be expected that the NFP will take advantage of this and strategize a campaign that emphasizes the importance of a skilled leader regarding national security issues.

About the Interviewee

Han Wool Jeong

Mr. Han Wool Jeong is the associate chair of Center for Public Opinion Research at East Asia Institute (EAI). He has published many research papers and columns regarding public opinion, especially on poll results regarding politics in South Korea and on the United States..