



“The General Election: Nothing Has Changed, Problems Begin Now”

Evaluating the Election Results and Forecasting the Future

- **Date & Time:** April 20, 2020 (Monday), 18:00 -21:00
- **Location:** East Asia Institute (EAI) Conference Room
- **Discussants:** **Won-Taek Kang** (Professor, Seoul National University),
Taewook Choi (Professor, Hallym University of Graduate Studies)
Yul Sohn (President, East Asia Institute; Professor, Yonsei University)

■ **Yul Sohn** Countless media reports have followed the latest 21st general election. Many of them have addressed the rationale behind the ruling party's landslide victory and the opposition party's crushing defeat. The East Asia Institute (EAI)'s interest lies in the future of Korean politics. EAI is honored to have two leading experts on Korean politics discuss the structural aspects of Korean democracy as seen through the recent general election, as well as the future prospects of Korean politics.

Firstly, we cannot help but point out the contentious politics between the two major parties underlying the election results. Contentions between the two major parties have continued throughout the 20th National Assembly, leading to street confrontations at Gwanghwamun and Seocho-dong. Even during the election campaigning, the two parties engaged in mudslinging in the absence of policy and brought about international disgrace by forming their own satellite parties under the quasi mixed-member proportional representation system. The votes were split between the two major parties while third parties barely managed to maintain their standing. In a broader sense, political polarization is a serious concern, even in the West. As a result of socioeconomic polarization, we are witnessing growing ideological and policy gaps among parties, as well as a rise in political conflicts and paralysis. How are we supposed to view South Korea in regard to these phenomena?

A Step Further in Political Polarization, Factional Logic and Contentious Politics

■ **Won-Taek Kang** Political polarization in South Korea is not as serious as that in the United States. In South Korea, we have always had a third (middle) ground. For instance, in past presidential elections, we had Chung Ju-young in 1992, Rhee In-je in 1997, Chung Mong-joon in 2002, Lee Hoi Chang in 2007, and Ahn Cheol-Soo in 2012 and 2017 as rep-



representatives of such third parties. There have always been voters who are dissatisfied with the polarizing trend and third forces who have lured them. This desire for a middle ground has been expressed in various general elections. However, voters were further polarized in the 21st general election due to competition among satellite parties. The formation of a satellite party on one side led to the creation of a competitive satellite party on the other side, leading to increased polarization and collapse of the middle-ground.

In terms of structure, the U.S.—as a federal republic—has division of power between federal and state governments. Unlike the U.S., countries such as South Korea have a powerful presidential system that entitles the president to a considerable amount of state power. Once this formidable president lies at the center of conflicts, the society is likely to polarize. In the case of the 21st general election, the political situation surrounding COVID-19 raised the question of whether the public will vote in support of the president and his ruling party or not. In addition, there was no visible candidate to drive the third party to moderate polarization. Previously, Ahn Cheol-Soo played the role of leading the third party. Unfortunately, Ahn has lost his novelty and his campaign for the recent election was disappointing. While voters desired a third middle ground, there were no leaders and political parties to satisfy their demand. However, the future emergence of a third party is still possible at any time. The results of the 21st general election were exceptional in that a single party has claimed 180 seats of the National Assembly. Although we should remain watchful, it is highly likely for the two major parties to develop a conflictual dynamic within such setting. As the two parties collide, there will be an increased need for a mediator to coordinate such bilateral conflicts, leaving open the possibility for the emergence of a third force.

■ **Taewook Choi** I also agree that political polarization in South Korea is different from that in the West. In fact, the two major political parties in South Korea have remained flexible on almost all policy issues in order to seize power. When comparing welfare policies of former administrations—such as the conservative decade under Roh Tae-Woo and Kim Young-sam and the progressive decade under Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun—socioeconomic polarization exacerbated during the progressive decade. Although non-regular employment was supposed to increase and chaebol business to expand under the conservative regime, it is paradoxical to witness them under the progressive regime. Park Geun-hye promoted relatively progressive welfare policies as the leader of the conservative Saenuri Party in the 2010s, when economic liberalization and the welfare state were highlighted as the spirit of the age. It is also difficult to differentiate between the left and the right when comparing welfare policies offered from Moon Jae-in and Park Geun-hye in the 2012 presidential election. Not to mention, the designated color of the conservative Saenuri Party at the time was red.¹ The reality of Korean politics is that parties will claim any policies as their own in order to win in battle.

Contentious politics of the two parties has yielded gravely negative consequences that are not restricted to ideological concerns. This has always been the case since South Korea's democratization in 1987. However, it is true that political tensions have exacerbated with the recent electoral reform. The two major parties disposed themselves of minimum dignity and utilized tricks to overtake proportional representation seats by creating satellite parties. Throughout the process, the public—sensitive to the surrounding contention—consequently participated in such contentious politics and

¹ The color red has often been associated with communism and North Korea since the Korean War (1950-1953).



aggravated the situation. In that sense, the electoral reform process further encouraged polarization and did so strategically. Initially, electoral reform was aimed at resolving factional politics by integrating a highly proportional electoral system that would enable new parties to emerge. Yet the two major parties limited any such possibility by interfering deeply into the process, attempting to gain a slice of the proportional seats. The third party has been demolished as a result.

A ‘COVID-19 Election’?

■ **Yul Sohn** Both Professor Kang and Professor Choi have pointed out structural problems inherent to South Korea's political system. In fact, if policy had been in the limelight throughout the election campaigns, the ruling party should have experienced a significantly challenging election. Given a policy-based election, the ruling party would have been judged critically based on the evaluation framework from its interim assessment. A three-year report card of the Moon administration—if we had to provide one—underlines the suffering economy; although the government is investing financially to prevent job insecurities, small- to medium-sized enterprises are faced with increasing obstacles day by day. According to EAI's November 2019 public opinion survey on Moon Jae-in's mid-term evaluation ([‘Moon Jae-in Administration Mid-term Assessment’](#), 2019/11/05), the administration also scored devastatingly low for its diplomatic and security performance with 4.5 points out of 10. Socially, the South Korean society has also been split due to the ‘Cho Kuk scandal.’ These circumstances would have negatively affected the ruling party's fortune. Did COVID-19—along with other institutional variables—play a part in providing the ruling party a more favorable environment by preventing a policy-oriented election?

■ **Taewook Choi** To be frank, the plot twist began with the outbreak of COVID-19. Doubts, distrust and actual fallacies of the government's response to COVID-19 were revealed as the election began. These were coupled with anxiety over roaming questions such as ‘what would South Korea be like during a global pandemic?’ Election campaigns kicked off amid heightened uncertainties about the post-COVID-19 society, but these concerns were met by positive evaluations—both domestic and international—of the Moon administration's response to the virus outbreak. The government and the ruling party seized the opportunity by inciting public fear that their loss in the election would consequently lead to national instability. Ordinary voters then supported these slogans of the ruling party which asked for public reinforcement in overcoming the COVID-19 national crisis. In a way, South Korea's relative success in handling the virus and the overall timing of the elections harmonized to create a favorable environment for the ruling party.

■ **Won-Taek Kang** In the event of a national crisis and emergency such as COVID-19, civic concerns tend to shift primarily towards the public and namely, the role of the state and public affairs. COVID-19 has raised public interest in the state's role—including that of the central and local governments—as well as in issues related to civic participation and public nature. I believe that such civic inclination towards public affairs has led to a higher voter turnout. Furthermore, the phenomenon of ‘rallying around the flag (and national leaders)’ was also observed during South Korea's battle against COVID-19.



The Collapse of Civil Society Group

■ **Yul Sohn** What went unseen throughout this COVID-19 election was the rise of third parties and civil society groups (NGOs). Let us first consider third parties. Perhaps what led to their downfall not only included the strategic actions of the two major parties, but also the inherent flaws of the third parties themselves. Apart from the Justice Party, it is difficult to grasp the third parties' values and ideologies albeit their importance has continuously been acknowledged. Serving as a counterweight between the two major parties and advocating moderate messages do not suffice what it takes to win the support of voters.

■ **Won-Taek Kang** Take the United Kingdom for example. The U.K. political system is comprised of the Conservative and Unionist Party and the Labour Party. Then there are the Liberal Democrats as the third party. In terms of the ideological spectrum, the Liberal Democratic Party lies somewhere in between the Conservative Party and the Labour Party but this does not signify that the Liberal Democratic Party takes on a moderate view of the two major parties' ideologies. Instead, Liberal Democrats pursue ideology and values pertaining to libertarianism and prioritize individual freedom, minority rights, and a pro-European attitude. Although some of these values overlap with those of the two major parties, they can be clearly distinguished from them. Then take, for example, South Korea's The People's Party led by Ahn Cheol-soo. In the past, he was asked what it means to be a 'moderate' when he was asked to speak at a lecture at Seoul National University. At the time, he responded that 'it depends from time to time.' This is not what it means to take on a moderate stance. The People's Party needs to have contents that are unique to its own party.

■ **Yul Sohn** During the recent election, it was also difficult to see civil society groups in operation when it had been quite politically active in the past. In the event of the election, however, there was a role that civil society played in monitoring politicians who attempted to sway the public towards a policy-oriented election by verifying electoral manifestos.

■ **Won-Taek Kang** 'Manifesto' in parliamentary elections holds significance for countries that are principally grounded upon a cabinet or a parliament. In South Korea, policy initiatives originate from the administration and the president, which consequently limits the significance of those proposed by candidates during general election campaigns. Moreover, even though civic groups assessed the candidates' pledges during the recent election, these failed to gain attention due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

In a sense, the role of civil society will gain more importance from now onwards. As a result of the election, political power within South Korea has become lopsided. The ruling party seized administrative power from the 2017 presidential election, provincial power from the 2018 local elections, and legislative power through the recent parliamentary election. In terms of the judicial branch, Moon Jae-in nominated 9 out of the 13 Supreme Court justices which will inevitably impact the independence of the judiciary. There has also been explicit pressure exercised upon the prosecution. With the collapse of the opposition party, it is more important now—in the aftermath of the election—than it was during the election for civil society to monitor and check the potential hoarding, misuse, abuse and corruption of power by the ruling party.



■ **Taewook Choi** Professor Kang has been rather gentle with his points, but I would like to be blunt with my statements. Let us take a closer look at South Korea's politics. If complex tactics and meaningful political games are played in every general and presidential election, then it will always be necessary to acquire new analyses on political competitions and assistance from civil society and relevant experts. However, the current political game is not based on policies or ideologies. Instead, South Korea's political game is one played by two influential political parties and an imperial president, who comprise the parallel pillars of the South Korean constitutional system and its domestic politics. With the two major parties and the president drawing power from individual localities and figures, the current political system is reminiscent of that from the agricultural age. The two major parties have grown accustomed to the policy environment that has been sustained for over three decades since South Korea's democratization in 1987. Therefore, they no longer require the help of academia or civil society. Alternatively, they look towards using and taking advantage of academics and civil society members since they do not need to solicit their assistance. Political parties and politicians no longer listen to them, and civil society is simply being exploited. Actually, civil society is also aware of this situation, often entering politics to be openly and explicitly exploited. As such, the overall authority that academia and civil society once held has now collapsed. Moreover, they have committed greater shame by entering politics and helping to lay the foundation for the creation of satellite parties during the recent election. Although civil society should be the one to scold politicians and prevent them from partaking in such acts, it has come to the point where it is civil society that has spearheaded the politicians' dirty tricks, facilitating the establishment of satellite parties. If civil society and academia wish to be in a position where they could suggest future directions for South Korean politics, they will need an environment in which the current contentious two-party politics can be disintegrated to pave the way for the emergence of new leading third parties. Once a new political party emerges in a new era, it will solicit their advice on the overall direction, ideology, strategy and tactics it should adopt as a new power. But this does not apply to political powers that are already accustomed to the current system and no longer require advice or monitoring from civil society.

Changes in Ideological and Generational Landscapes?

■ **Yul Sohn** South Korea's political landscape has shifted from conservative to progressive due to landslide victories won by progressive parties in the past several elections, and many have claimed that this is the 'new normal.' Is South Korean politics really changing?

■ **Taewook Choi** This is an incorrect interpretation. South Korean politics still has not changed. Let us first look at the generation issue. The 586 generation has rather reached its pinnacle as a result of the recent general election. In order to argue that a generational shift has occurred, the 586 generation—which began with the 386 generation—must step down.² It seems, however, that current politics has been dominated by the 586 generation. The two major parties and the

² The 586 generation refers to South Koreans who were active during democratization in the 1980s. They are called the '586 generation' because many of them are now in their 50s, went to university in the 1980s, and were born in the 1960s.



Justice Party have mimicked a generational shift by incorporating some younger voices, but a meaningful generational shift has not yet occurred.

The answer to the question, 'isn't the Democratic Party's consecutive victory (2016 general elections, impeachment of former president Park Geun-hye, 2017 presidential election, 2020 general election) symbolic of the progressives' rise?' is 'No.' Prior to these elections, successive parties of the conservative Grand National Party also won four elections. Lee Myung-bak won by a landslide in the 2007 presidential election, which were followed by conservative victories in the 2008 and 2012 general elections, and another conservative victory in the presidential election the same year. The United Future Party, a conservative successor of the Grand National Party, continued winning at the time, but this is not to be interpreted as a rise of conservatism. As aforementioned, in early 2010, politics was considered to be relatively progressive due to welfare state policies, to the point that conservative representative Park Geun-hye had even deemed her party a 'welfare state party.'

■ **Won-Taek Kang** I also disagree with the 'progressive transition' argument. According to a survey by *Gallup Korea*, there have been interesting trends in South Korean politics. Whether it is the Liberty Korea Party or the United Future Party, the conservative party's approval rating has been relatively stagnant at 18% to 25% since the 2017 presidential election. The approval rating for Moon Jae-in and the Democratic Party far exceeds that of the conservative party. However, the approval rating for Moon and the Democratic Party tends to fluctuate whenever there is an incident. What is amusing is that the respective fall in the Democratic Party's approval rating does not necessarily translate to an increased approval rating of the conservative party. Democrats and others who broke away from the Democratic Party or Moon Jae-in's support group have transitioned to a 'no supporting party' faction. The conservative party did not succeed in providing these individuals an alternative and hence their approval rating has been unchanged.

According to the results from the recent general election, the Democratic Party won 49.9% of the constituency votes and the United Future Party obtained 41.5%. Party votes yielded similar results, with 33.8% for the Future Korea Party and 33.4% for the Together Citizens' Party. Of course, once the votes of other liberal parties including the Open Democratic Party and the Justice Party are added, the percentage rises to 48.5%. But this does not signify a fundamental shift in the ideological underpinning. The conservative party's approval rating has remained stable in the meantime because the conservatives have not properly responded to the political changes following 2017, which in turn led the moderate voters to rule in favor of the Democratic Party.

The political changes that the conservative force should have weighed include the 2016-2017 candlelight protests and the impeachment of former president Park Geun-hye. South Korean politics seems to be divided into before and after these events. The candlelight protests brought an end to the traditional conservative paradigm of the Park Chung-hee era. The world has changed but the conservatives have not. As such, it is not the case where the public sentiment shifted towards the progressives, but rather, it did not transfer over to the conservatives. Even though individuals may have a handful of complaints about the Moon Jae-in administration, they are hesitant to support the conservative party. This is not a shift in the ideological landscape.



The problem is the conservative party's contents. The contents cannot be satisfied by the 'security conservative' and 'market conservative' narratives placed forth on conservative Youtube channels and at Gwanghwamun protests. These days, the majority of voters are interested in housing, employment, education, retirement security and health. Does the conservative party care about any of these? The results of the recent general election should not be perceived as carrots for the Democratic Party, but as sticks for the conservatives' poor performance.

Current Proportional System to be Abolished

■ **Yul Sohn** To sum up what has been discussed so far, there have been shifts in the number of seats between the ruling and opposition parties as a result of the election, but the fundamental framework of South Korean politics has remained largely unchanged. Political parties have failed to transform into policy parties, and party membership, generation and ideological landscape have also remained stagnant. Rather, the rules of the game have been distorted, consequently strengthening the contentious dynamic between the two major parties and factional politics. There have only been dim reviews about the election. What areas should we pay attention to and attend to first in order to bring about tangible political changes?

■ **Won-Taek Kang** The key to overcoming the bilateral contention between the two parties depends on the willingness of conservatives to alter their persona to fit younger and more reformative characteristics. These changes take time. The Labour Party of the U.K. waited 18 years after losing power to Margaret Thatcher's conservative party in 1979. It was also not until 1997 when Tony Blair, a young party leader, emerged and promised the public that he would reform the party under the banner of 'New Labour,' that the Labour Party was able to reclaim its power. Restoration of lost trust takes more than fixing minor blemishes. The conservative party should continue to debate with the ruling party as its opposition, but as a representative of state affairs, it needs to propose alternatives for the future and restore public trust. Confrontation and competition alone are not enough for rebuilding trust.

But as of now, whether there will be immediate political conflicts or contentions depend on the Democratic Party, which has won 180 seats of the National Assembly. Although it currently has an overwhelming amount of power, there will be backlash if it manages state affairs unilaterally. The Democratic Party needs to be considerate of the opposition party and exercise political power wisely. In 2004, the progressive Uri Party won the majority with 152 seats, but its poor management of state affairs only intensified political contention, leading to a decline in the party's overall approval rating. The progressives need to be mindful of such former experience.

■ **Taewook Choi** In order to overcome the harmful consequences of South Korean politics, institutional reform will be necessary. The recent general election is the first result of the reformed electoral system. The United Future Party—which originally opposed the reform—will aim to dispose of the current proportional system. Moreover, members of the National Assembly who represent the Democratic Party are also likely to support its abolishment since they would have discreetly wished to do so. I believe that the current quasi mixed-member proportional representation system will be



abrogated. There are two different steps that could be taken following the system's withdrawal. The first is to maintain a mixed-member proportional (MMP) representation system and the other is to introduce an entirely new electoral system.

If we are to maintain the mixed-member proportional system, at least three things should be changed. The first is to reduce the proportion of constituency seats. Currently, provided that the total number of seats remains 300, constituency seats account for 253. This is 84% of the seats that the two major parties have always shared and monopolized. Unless the rate of compensation is reduced, we cannot expect a meaningful proportional representation system. As a reference, the ratio of constituency seats to proportional seats in countries such as Germany and New Zealand that have adopted the mixed-member proportional system is 50:50. The second change that should be made addresses the rate of compensation. In the recent general election, the Justice Party was gained 10% of the proportional votes. In following the German electoral system, this would mean that the Justice Party is entitled to 30 seats (10%) from the total of 300 seats, making it a leading party. For example, if the Justice Party received five constituency seats, it should receive 25 proportional seats to make up for the 100% compensation rate. As of now, South Korea has a compensation rate of 50%, which makes it embarrassingly, the first and only country in the world to do so. In a situation where there are already serious imbalances in local constituencies, a 50% compensation rate, let alone 100%, would force third parties to assume the role of minor parties even if they are not satellite parties. The third change is for an institutional buffer and mechanism to be put in place by the government to prevent the two major parties from playing dirty tricks and creating their own satellite parties. One thing certain is that there needs to be a regulation that will accompany the mixed-member proportional system. A mixed-member proportional system is an electoral system in which seats are distributed according to the party's votes. In line with this purpose, we could potentially include a provision in the election law that states 'a party that has not issued a proportional candidate—that is, a party that wishes not to be judged by the people—cannot have candidates running for constituency seats.' Lastly, there is also the option of introducing an entirely different electoral system. Examples include the open-list proportional system followed by various developed countries including the Netherlands and Sweden, or other hybrid forms of the proportional system.

■ **Won-Taek Kang** The problem is that the two major parties benefit from the electoral system based on single-member constituencies and a simple plurality system. In other words, the key is to reform towards a highly proportionate electoral system, even though it is likely for the two major parties to prefer to maintain the status quo regardless of their hostile symbiosis. It is possible for the next presidential candidate to offer electoral reform as one of his pledges and win the election, but a reform is not as easy as it may seem. First, presidential candidates tend to make promises without keeping them. In 2012, Moon Jae-in promised that he would implement a mixed-member proportional representation system and also did so recently without seeing it through. Another concern is that electoral reform is highly relevant to the political interests of National Assembly members, making it difficult for the president to take the initiative. In the end, electoral reform requires a social consensus. The level of social consensus on electoral reform has to increase, which raises the importance of the role that civil society has to play.



The President Needs to Mobilize a Citizens' Assembly

■ **Taewook Choi** I fully agree that the role of civil society is important. In a representative democracy, the electoral system is for establishing the principles of agents and the citizens have the decision-making power as the principal of the state. With this consideration in mind, the electoral system is more important than the Constitution. It is hence vicious and violent to change a system as important as the electoral system though fast-track on the basis that the majority wishes to. The reason why the current electoral system has become ragged and scrapped of is because overall level of consensus is low. Conversely, if it had been established through civic consensus, the major parties would have been unable to incorporate dirty tricks to claim more votes.

I have previously proposed the introduction of a citizens' assembly for raising the level of consensus (E-AIR[EAI Radio] ['Aimless Electoral Reform: Public Opinion Dismissed'](#), 2020/03/12). In fact, there are countries that have reformed their electoral system through citizens' assembly. In Canada and the Netherlands where election laws have been fairly developed, governors have mobilized citizens' assembly on several occasions so that the citizens could decide on state election laws. If this is applied to South Korea, the president could summon a citizens' assembly to draft a reform plan for the electoral system, and then present it to the National Assembly as a legislative bill. Then, the National Assembly can proceed with an open vote. With the opening of the citizens' assembly, the entire civil society will discuss the issue.

President Moon Jae-in has gained a massive party of 180 seats that can pass almost any bill. This means that an imperial president has successfully emerged from the bilateral framework of the 1987 Constitution which is based on both imperial presidency and a two-party system composed of constituencies and individuals. It can also be argued that the president now holds the capacity, strength, and authority to act as a statesman. I hope that the imperial president will utilize the citizens' assembly to propose a prudent plan for South Korea's future electoral reform.

The Imperial Presidency Needs Change

■ **Won-Taek Kang** I would like to end by discussing South Korea's power structure. What should follow an electoral reform is a structural reform in power. At the heart of the 2016 candlelight protests was the need to change the 'imperial presidency.' However, even after the transition of power, we still seem to lie under an imperial presidency. The Blue House's lead in state affairs has actually been further strengthened. Let me take the U.K. as an example once more. I was impressed by Queen Elizabeth's public address on the COVID-19 crisis, which was her first public speech since World War II. If the South Korean president makes a similar speech under the existing system, it would be digested according to factional politics, splitting the responses into two types. Criticisms at the leadership/administrative level and those at the national/state level should be clearly distinguished from each other. When these criticisms become intertwined, this is when the respective country is led astray. There needs to be a division of power between the president—who leads social integration, national security, and long-term future strategies—and the prime minister—who serves as the head of the administration. This refers to constitutional amendment but if this is difficult, then the prime minister should be elected to



the National Assembly. I sincerely hope that social discussions on constitutional amendment will further proliferate in the future.

■ **Yul Sohn** Both Professor Kang and Professor Choi, strong advocates of the proportional representation system and a decentralized presidential system, have concluded this discussion with institutional insights. Interestingly, the desirable scenario for future South Korean politics seems to be one in which an imperial president opens the door for a highly proportional electoral reform, and a more decentralized presidential system is established by the next administration. President Moon Jae-in has heavy responsibilities to fulfill in the given era.

The recent general election provided the Moon administration with ample power but less than two years are left before the next presidential election. Shadows of COVID-19 still loom large over South Korea, and a storm is likely to follow in its aftermath. Self-employed businesses, small- and medium-sized enterprises, marginal companies, let alone the entire economy are undergoing an economic crisis and the government will have to endure an arduous battle in order to stabilize the economy by means of issuing government bonds, injecting public funds to private sectors and undertaking corporate restructuring. A tsunami reminiscent of the financial crisis of 1997 will sweep through not only South Korea, but the entire world. The international economic order will be in disarray.

If the ruling party becomes intoxicated with power and dominates politics, the opposition party will be in resistance. Contentious politics will be reinvigorated, leading to yet another political paralysis in South Korea. If that occurs in the midst of an unprecedented crisis, South Korea will reach a state of debacle. As indicated in the discussion, the government and the ruling party will need to first pursue cooperative governance with the opposition party and cooperate with civil society. Social consensus is key to managing crises. To this end, we hope that the ruling party—which now harbors administrative, legislative, and judicial power—will offer a national unity cabinet that would unite the will of the people and form an economic 'dream team' to show wisdom and courage for overcoming this crisis. ■



Discussants

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