POWER SHIFT IN SOUTH KOREA: APRIL 15 GENERAL ELECTION

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The general election that was held in South Korea on April 15 was a watershed event by any measure. Most important, it marked the first time since the 1961 *coup d' etat* spearheaded by Park Chung Hee that a liberal party—or a party on the left of the ideological spectrum—won a majority of National Assembly seats. Second, it ushered in *yodae yaso* (control of the parliament by a pro-government party), which will inject a new lease on the life of the Roh Moo Hyun government and its reform agenda. Third, the general election, the 17th of its kind, may have helped to blunt the pernicious effect of "regionalism" in South Korea's electoral politics, albeit marginally. Fourth, it signaled the end of an era dominated by the "three Kims." Finally, it changed the demographic complexion of the assembly, increasing the proportion of both women and younger representatives. All this presages a notable change in Seoul's domestic and foreign policies alike.

Emergence of a Liberal Majority

The Uri party (whose full name is *Yeollin Uri-dang* [Literally, "Our Open Party"], which won 152 out of 299 seats in the National Assembly, was the beneficiary of a backlash by the electorate against the impeachment of Roh Moo Hyun by the outgoing assembly. The motion to impeach Roh was approved on March 12 by the votes of the Grand National Party (GNP) and the Democratic Millennium Party (DMP). The charges against Roh—election law violations, incompetence, and corruption of his close associates—were widely perceived as trivial, and an overwhelming majority (70 percent) of respondents in subsequent opinion polls opposed the impeachment motion. Impeachment, under the South Korean constitution, is equivalent to indictment, and the nine-judge Constitutional Court is empowered to hand down a decision either approving or rejecting it.

Whereas the Uri party has tripled its strength, the GNP's representation declined from 137 (out of 273) to 121. The decline, although stripping the GNP of its number one position in the assembly, turned out to be much less than had been anticipated. Significantly, it is in a position to block any constitutional amendment, which requires a two-thirds majority approval in the assembly. It was the DMP that suffered the most humiliating setback, managing to win only nine seats. The party under whose banner Roh won his presidency in December 2002 and from which members of what became the Uri Party seceded in September 2003, the DMP had 61 members in the outgoing assembly.

No less impressive than the Uri Party's capture of the majority seats in the assembly is the emergence of the New Labor Party (NLP), which over night became the third party in

the assembly with ten seats. Never before had a party representing organized labor and espousing such progressive, even radical, policies ever gained seats in the assembly. The NLP benefited from a change in South Korea's electoral law, which gave each voter two votes, one for a candidate and another for a political party. Although the NLP managed to elect only two candidates in electoral districts, it polled 13 percent of the proportional representation (PR) vote, which translated into 8 more seats. Should the Uri Party and the NLP collaborate in the assembly, the liberal "bloc" will command 162 votes, a comfortable majority.

A New Lease of Life for the Roh Government

Inasmuch as the Roh impeachment was the number one issue in the general election, the latter could be equated as a referendum on Roh. From that perspective, Roh scored a resounding victory. What needs stressing, nonetheless, is that the Uri Party received only 38.3 percent of the PR vote, while the GNP polled 35.8 percent. While, strictly speaking, the electoral outcome will not or should not sway the Constitutional Court, it may nonetheless influence, in some intangible fashion, the thinking and behavior of some of the judges. As noted, moreover, the case against Roh is rather weak; hence there is better than an even chance that he will be either exonerated or merely reprimanded by the court.

Assuming that Roh regains full powers of his office in the coming weeks, he will now have the luxury of either a bare majority or a comfortable majority in the National Assembly. His reform agenda, therefore, will have a chance to be enacted into law and implemented. The flip side of this coin, however, is that he will no longer be able to blame the assembly for omissions in or failures of policy.

Regionalism in the General Election

Regionalism in electoral politics has been a conspicuous feature in South Korea since 1963, when Park Chung Hee drew a disproportionate amount of support from voters in his native Yongnam region (Kyongsang provinces). It deepened with the emergence of the Kim Dae Jung candidacy in the presidential election of 1971, when his native Honam region (Cholla provinces) became his stronghold, although he also did well in other regions except Yongnam.

In recent years three political parties have been strongly identified with particular regions—the GNP with Yongnam, the MDP with Honam, and the United Liberal Democrats (ULD) with the Chungchong provinces. The Uri party, an offshoot of the MDP, however, had a somewhat broader geographical base. In one sense, this general pattern repeated itself in the 17th general election. In another sense, however, one can detect signs that regionalism in South Korean voting behavior may have begun to erode.

To begin with the GNP, 60 out of its 100 successful candidates in district, as distinct from PR, contests, hail from Yongnam. It yielded only seven of the 67 seats contested in the region—Pusan, Taegu, Ulsan, and the two Kyongsang provinces. Both the MDP and the ULD retained their regional roots; in fact, both suffered their worst electoral defeats ever,

failing to win any contested seats outside of their respective regions at all. The Uri Party, in tripling its strength in the assembly, has managed to broaden its base further. Only in Yongnam did it fare poorly, failing to elect any candidates in Taegu and North Kyongsang province. Winning seats in Pusan (1), Ulsan (1), and South Kyongsang province (2), on the other hand, could be viewed as an achievement of sorts. Its strongholds consisted of the Seoul metropolitan area. In Seoul it won twice as many seats as the GNP—32 vs. 16. It outperformed the GNP in Inchon (9 to 3) and Kyonggi province (35 to 14) as well. The new entrant into the assembly, the DLP, demonstrated that it had support in all the major cities and provinces, drawing between 11 and 22 percent of the PR vote, with a national total of 13 percent. The DLP, in fact, can be characterized as the only political party represented in the assembly with a fairly even distribution of support throughout the country.

The End of the Era of the Three Kims

Three Kims—Kim Young Sam, Kim Dae Jung, and Kim Jong Pil—played dominant roles in South Korean politics for many decades. Two of them have served as presidents but with their retirement, their influence has waned markedly. Any lingering influence of Kim Dae Jung may have all but vanished with the marginalization of the MDP, whose strength in the assembly plummeted from 61 to 9. As for Kim Jong Pil, not only did his party, the ULD, see its representation in the assembly diminish 60 percent (from 10 to 4) but he himself failed to win a seat. Due to his party's failure to poll 3 percent of the PR vote, it was shut out from the distribution of the 56 PR seats, and Kim Jong Pil, who headed his party's PR list, faced the prospect of an involuntary retirement from the political arena.

Demographic Profile

The successful candidates in the April 15 general election tend to be younger than their predecessors and boast the largest contingent of women. It is striking that 63 percent (188/299) are first-term representatives. In terms of age, 35.4 percent are in their 40s, 40.5 percent in their 50s, and 16.4 percent in the 60 and above bracket. The average age is 51. The number of women has increased from 16 in the outgoing assembly to 39 in the new one. In proportional terms, women's share of the total assembly seats has increased from 5.9 percent to 13 percent. Although this places South Korea below the United States (14.3 percent), the South Korean parliament now has a higher percentage of women than its counterparts in Japan (7.1 percent), Italy (11.5 percent) and France (12.2 percent.)

Policy Implications

If the Roh government presses ahead with a vigorous implementation of its reform agenda, it can count on the support of the Uri Party, which Roh is expected to join formally in the coming months, and, most probably, of the DLP as well. Such measures as reducing the perquisites of assembly members, improving the status of temporary

workers, and, possibly, regulating business conglomerates to a greater extent than is the case today may receive attention.

In external policy, steering an "independent" course may become a high priority. That may conceivably have the potential to cause friction in Seoul-Washington relations. The Roh government will continue to pursue an engagement policy toward the North, upholding the main components of its predecessor's "sunshine" policy. Whether that will strain the ROK-U.S. alliance and affect the conduct of six-party talks remains to be seen. The acid test is whether the Roh government will honor its commitment to dispatch some 3,000 troops to Iraq. Indications point to a positive outcome. For, notwithstanding the proclivity of a sizable number of newly-elected Assembly members, the ROK-U.S. alliance is too important to undercut. If post-election polls are to be believed, support for the implementation of Seoul's commitment to Washington outweighs opposition or skepticism among members of the National Assembly and, arguably, among the general public as well.

All in all, South Korea is poised to enter a new stage in its political evolution, and one can only hope that all the players in the unfolding drama will keep in mind that they have a historic opportunity to make a contribution to the improvement of the human condition.