

SOUTH KOREA NATIONAL ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS 2024: THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY OF KOREA WINS MAJORITY IN NATIONAL ASSEMBLY BY SECURING 174 SEATS

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INTRODUCTION

South Korea's National Assembly elections took place on April 10th, 2024, and filled all 300 seats of the parliament. Specifically, 254 seats were directly elected while 46 seats were selected on proportional representation.¹ In this process voters cast two ballots, one for their local district and one for a political party. Subsequently, the proportion of votes received by each party is the basis for the allocation of the proportional seats in the National Assembly.² The elected members serve a four-year term.

As the results of the elections were announced, the liberal Democratic Party of Korea (DP) won a majority in the National Assembly by securing 174 seats. The second largest party, the conservative People Power Party (PPP), won 109 seats. The third largest party, the progressive Rebuilding Korea Party (RKP), won 12 seats. The remaining five seats were allocated to minor parties.³ The DP will most likely try to form alliances with the minor political parties within the parliament to gain more voting power in order to overpower the PPP's political agenda and its conservative views on policy.⁴

The outcome of this election will strongly affect president Yoon's domestic policy agenda as the DP received a majority in the parliament.⁵ Certain problems persist within South Korea, such as struggles to uphold minority rights and their social integration, corruption scandals arising from government and political members, economic issues, and matters related to domestic and gender-based violence, in spite of existing legislation.⁶ The newly elected government is expected to address such issues.

1. BACKGROUND AND CANDIDATES

While the National Assembly is controlled by two main political parties, the DP and PPP, various minor parties also hold their presence within the Assembly. After the 2022 presidential elections, where the PPP took over the presidency from the DP, the PPP was under pressure to gain a majority within the April election. However, as the DP gained majority the domestic policy agenda of the Yoon presidency was challenged. The most pressing domestic issues revolve around economic matters, such as high prices of living,

¹ Katlyn King and Natalia Slavney, 'South Korea's 2024 Legislative election Primer' *Stimson* (4 April 2024) <<https://www.stimson.org/2024/south-koreas-2024-legislative-election-primer/>> accessed 11 April 2024.

² *ibid.*

³ Victor Cha, Jinwan Park and Andy Lim, 'South Korea's 2024 General election: Results and Implications' *CSIS* (10 April 2024) <<https://www.csis.org/analysis/south-koreas-2024-general-election-results-and-implications>> accessed 11 April 2024.

⁴ J James Kim, 'Contemplating Possible Outcomes and Implications of the South Korean General election' *Stimson* (27 March 2024) <<https://www.38north.org/2024/03/contemplating-possible-outcomes-and-implications-of-the-south-korean-general-election/>> accessed 11 April 2024.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ 'Freedom in the World: South Korea' *Freedom House* (2023) <<https://freedomhouse.org/country/south-korea/freedom-world/2024>> accessed 11 April 2024.

gender inequality matters, medical school reforms to tackle the fast-ageing population crisis and allegations of corruption within the government.

Within the National Assembly elections, 699 candidates were registered for the directly elected seats, and 253 candidates were registered for the proportional representation seats.⁷ Even though South Korea has the aforementioned two main parties, multiple parties have been present and running for election throughout its history.⁸ For example, the National Innovation Party of liberal views is the third most popular party, and the New Reform Party, New Future Party, and Green Justice Party, while minor, have received high approval ratings.⁹

After the last National Assembly elections in 2020, DP, the main opposition party, held an absolute majority of 180 seats within the Assembly.¹⁰ As Yoon took the win from the DP in the 2022 presidential election, pressure was building on the PPP to gain additional seats in the April election.¹¹ Because the PPP did not receive a majority in the parliament, the DP will bring challenges to the Yoon administration and the remaining presidency as he pushes forward his domestic and foreign policy agenda.¹² The Yoon administration has been facing domestic challenges in relation to allegations of corruption, low birth rates, gender inequality, and economic issues as well as problems with the local press and advancing with a resisted medical reform.¹³

The DP is viewed to focus especially on economic issues, such as addressing the high prices for food products, while tax reform matters will likely be in halt within the current parliamentary term.¹⁴ Furthermore, gender inequality issues might not be a focal point on the agenda of the DP, as pre-elections, the chairman made sexually derogatory comments about a female politician from the ruling party..¹⁵ In relation to the proposed medical reform and the strikes following it, the DP is assumed to take a negotiating view, with aims to create a compromise with the medical associations. As in 2020, the DP went into negotiations with the Korea Medical Association and the Korean Intern and Resident Association about the plans on the reforms within the medical field, which was subsequently halted due to the negotiations.¹⁶

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Katlyn King and Natalia Slavney (n 1).

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Hyung-Jin Kim and Kim Tong-Hyung, 'South Korean parliamentary elections: Here's what people are worried about as they vote this week' *AP News* (9 April 2024) <<https://apnews.com/article/south-korea-election-hot-issues-green-onions-860cbb313a4afb3776fd87052a051c9d>> accessed 12 April 2024;

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ Sarah Kim, 'DP signals possibility of compromise with striking doctors' *Korea Joongdang Daily* (2 September 2020) <<https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2020/09/02/national/socialAffairs/doctors-strike-Korean-Medical-Association-medical-school-admissions-quota/20200902191100384.html>> accessed 17 April 2024.

2. IMPLICATIONS

The presence of a legislative gridlock within the National Assembly for the present parliamentary term is possible due to the clashing views of the main political parties. Additionally, the progression of women's rights can slow down due to a low percentage of women represented within the National Assembly and for the conservative views of the PPP. However, Yoon will most likely be deterred from moving forward with its plan to dissolve the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, which is a major win for women's rights. As such, economic and social rights may be shifting, with the most pressing issues related to costs of living and high food prices, as expressed by voters. Moreover, the foreign policy of South Korea will most probably remain intact, which has positive outcomes for North Korean refugees residing in South Korea.

2.1. HUMAN RIGHTS

Due to the DP's and PPP's clashing views on policies, achieving consensus within legislative matters can be difficult and lead to stalling in important matters related to labour rights, trade union issues, gender equality, and economic concerns, such as rising prices.¹⁷ This falls to the detriment of the citizens, affected by the lack of efficient legislation in place to address such issues. As a democratically elected government, the DP and the PPP should compromise in regards to legislative measures to address domestic issues present and respect the power vested in them by the people of South Korea.

The representation of women in the National Assembly is fairly low, with women holding only about 19 percent of the seats.¹⁸ This factors into the slow progression of women's rights as well as difficulties in combatting gender-based and domestic violence targeted against women in South Korea. Furthermore, the PPP has a conservative outlook with regards to LGBTQ+ rights and feminism, and the support for such movements. This indicates a potential decline in the progression of important human rights.¹⁹ However, the opposition DP holds a more progressive outlook on such matters, and thereby can counterbalance the potential setbacks imposed by the PPP.²⁰ The DP has stood for women's rights in the past,

¹⁷ 'South Korea holds parliamentary elections: All you need to know' *Al Jazeera* (9 April 2024) <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/4/9/south-korea-holds-parliamentary-elections-all-you-need-to-know>> accessed 11 April 2024.

¹⁸ 'Freedom in the World: South Korea' (n 6).

¹⁹ Metodi Tzanov, 'South Korea: PPP and DP set for heated race in April 10 parliamentary elections' *LinkedIn* (12 March 2024) <<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/south-korea-ppp-dp-set-heated-race-april-10-elections-metodi-tzanov-eezue/>> accessed 11 April 2024.

²⁰ Sue Mi Terry, 'South Korea's Opposition Parties' Projected Win: What it Means' *Council on Foreign Relations* (10 April 2024) <<https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/south-koreas-opposition-parties-projected-win-what-it-means>> accessed 11 April 2024.

however, there have been instances where they have turned a blind eye to sexual abuse of women.²¹

Yoon, during his presidential campaign, promised to dissolve the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family by stating that discrimination against women is no longer existent in South Korea. However, as the PPP did not obtain a majority within the parliament, it will be difficult for Yoon to go ahead with this plan.²² This has major implications for women, as the Ministry is responsible for overseeing and coordinating policies affecting women, families, and youth, and thereby increase the protection of women's rights, rights in relation to family life, and the development of youth.

In terms of economic and social rights, there will also be shifts. For many South Korean voters, economic issues have heavily influenced for whom to cast their vote, in particular those pertaining to jobs, wages, costs of living, and rising food prices.²³ The Yoon administration has been trying to push forward reforms related to labour matters, such as amending the wage system to be more equitable. For the moment, only a minor share of the working population is receiving wages in line with their work contribution, and the majority has struggled to receive a proportional share. The administration also envisages restrictions to the 52-hour workweeks.²⁴ These reforms are at a stand-still due to the main opposition DP's majority in the parliament after the April 10th elections.²⁵ However, as the DP is a supporter of enhanced human rights, matters related to social inequality and labour rights could also be focused upon within the next four-year parliamentary term. Additional concerns relate to the ageing population, as well as securing livelihoods, the low birth rate, and the high levels of unemployment within youth, all crucial matters to address in reassuring the optimistic future of South Korea.²⁶

2.2. FOREIGN RELATIONS

It is expected that the agenda for foreign relations and policy, driven by the Yoon administration, will not change drastically upon the outcome of the elections, as for the first two years of his presidential term the parliament also had an opposition majority. Even then, Yoon changed the course of foreign policy by focusing on strengthening US-South Korea and Japan-South Korea relations on security, by taking a firm stance on provocations coming from North Korea, and by providing support for Ukraine and taking a critical view on China relations.²⁷ In contrast, the DP takes a more neutral approach to supporting Ukraine and in

²¹ Sotaro Suzuki, 'South Korea's ruling party seeks redemption with female voters' *NIKKEI Asia* (20 March 2022) <<https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Comment/South-Korea-s-ruling-party-seeks-redemption-with-female-voters>> accessed 12 April 2024.

²² *ibid.*

²³ Hyung-Jin Kim and Kim Tong-Hyung (n 14) 'South Korea holds parliamentary elections: All you need to know' (n 17).

²⁴ Jungwoo Lee, Tehyok Daniel Yi, Chee-Kwan Kim et al., 'President Yoon and Labour: Two-Year Recap and the road Ahead' *Yulchon LLC* (9 April 2024)

<<https://www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=a24e3056-e856-421b-81e8-dc81f92cecff>> accessed 12 April 2024.

²⁵ 'The First Year of the Yoon Administration and Its Implications' *Yulchon LLC* (12 May 2023).

²⁶ Sue Mi Terry (n 20).

²⁷ Victor Cha, Jinwan Park and Andy Lim (n 3).

relations with China, and has a more pro-North Korea outlook.²⁸ Such differences in views of PPP and the DP may challenge the adoption of measures related to foreign policy which require legislative action. However, as the DP does not hold a three-fifths majority necessary for some legislative actions to be approved, nor does it hold a supermajority, the control they hold on their own within the parliament is not decisive in relation to law making and policies.²⁹ However, if the DP is able to form coalitions with like minded political parties within the government, the standstill of the current foreign policy could be realised.

As part of their foreign policy, the stance taken by the Yoon administration on North Korea's provocations signals an optimistic future for North Korean refugees residing in South Korea, as they will be safer from forcible return to North Korea, and thereby their rights will be respected by South Korea. This includes rights related to non-refoulement when the return would subject the refugee to serious threats to life or freedom or the right not to be punished for entering the country illegally.³⁰ Furthermore, as the government is guided by a policy which is critical towards China, South Korea can play a role as an international actor in condemning China's practice of forcibly returning North Korean refugees to North Korea, where they will face violence, detention, and abuse by North Korean officials.³¹

CONCLUSION

01

Outcome of the elections.

The DP secured a majority in the National Assembly, while the PPP won the second largest number of seats. The DP will likely try to form alliances with other political parties to receive more power in the parliament. If the DP succeeds, the Yoon presidency domestic policy agenda will be stalled.

02

Matters at the forefront of domestic policy agenda.

The most pressing issues present on the domestic policy agenda relate to economic matters, such as high food prices and increasing costs of living, gender inequality and domestic and gender based violence, fast-ageing

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (adopted 28 July 1951, entered into force 22 April 1954) 189 UNTS 137 (Refugee Convention), Article 31 and 33.

³¹ Jack Kim and Ju-min Park, 'South Korea protests to China over suspected North Korea repatriations' *Reuters* (13 October 2023)

<<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-korea-says-north-korean-defectors-china-sent-back-north-2023-10-13/>> accessed 11 April 2024.

population, low birth rates, allegations of corruption within the government, the presence of unemployment within youth, labour rights, and a resisted medical school reform.

03

Legislative gridlock.

As the two main political parties, the DP and PPP, hold different views on policy matters, a legislative gridlock might be present which will negatively affect the pressing domestic issues. Such gridlock will also undermine the democratic aspect of the parliament as the elected members are not representing the people of South Korea effectively.

04

Improvement and decline in human rights.

Women's rights have seen some progression, with halting the agenda of Yoon to dissolve the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, however as the PPP holds conservative views, the progression of women's rights is not a focal point within their policy. This is however counterbalanced with the DP's more progressive outlook on women's rights. As the DP is a supporter of human rights, matters related to social injustice and the economic issues will most likely be at the forefront of their agenda.

05

Foreign relations continue on the same path.

The policy agenda on foreign relations is seen to remain the same. However, if the DP gains more voting power in the National Assembly by forming alliances, Yoon will have more difficulty in advancing his foreign policy. Strengthening relations with the US and Japan on security matters, and taking a critical stance on the actions of China and North Korea will be at the core of the foreign policy.

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