

AN INTERVIEW WITH YONG-CHOO HA, SHIN BEOM-SHIK, AND LEE WANG-HWI

South Korea's Parliamentary Election: Implications for Korea and the United States

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Published: April 26, 2012

South Korea's National Assembly elections, held two weeks ago, were an opportunity for both the ruling conservative Saenuri Party and the liberal opposition Democratic United Party to gain the upper hand before December's presidential election. The ruling party retained a slight majority, beating expectations, while the opposition party won a majority in the heavily populated Seoul metropolitan area. NBR recently interviewed a trio of Korean political scholars to get their take on the election results, the implications for Korea's December presidential election, and what the mood of the Korean electorate can tell us about Korea-U.S. relations and how future Korean governments might handle foreign policy issues such as North Korea, free trade, and sharing the military burden.

Yong-Chool Ha is the Korea Foundation Professor of Korean Social Science at the University of Washington, and he is joined by two visiting Korean scholars at the University of Washington, Shin Beom-shik, an Associate Professor of Political Science and International Relations at Seoul National University, and Lee Wang-hwi, an Associate Professor of Social Science at Ajou University.

The April National Assembly election in Korea has been described by many in the South Korean news media as a bellwether for the December presidential election. Was the ruling party's slim victory two weeks ago surprising?

Yong-chool Ha: Many people in Korea thought that the results of the election were a surprise because the conservative ruling Saenuri Party was not expected to do as well as it did. Many saw President Lee Myung-bak's policy failures as an opening for the opposition Democratic United Party (DUP) to score a big win

in the parliamentary elections. In fact the opposition party anticipated it could possibly win a majority in this election. Meanwhile, the ruling party thought that if it was able to retain or obtain about 120 of the National Assembly's seats it would be a good result for them, considering the expectations, but against expectations, the ruling party came out with a slight majority. So, compared to the expectations and pundits' predictions before the election, yes, the Saenuri Party victory was a surprise.

But I think the predictions were off from the beginning and were not able to read the mood of Korean society. If you look at sources of the ruling party's victory, it basically won big in the conservative stronghold of the southeast, with one or two exceptions, but it couldn't win any seats in the

southwestern region, where the opposition party is strong. The ruling party won where it was supposed to win. But in a bit of a surprise, the Saenuri Party won a majority in Chungcheong Province in the central region and Gangwon Province in the east. These are usually more competitive for the non-ruling parties. And in the Seoul area, the Saenuri Party was resoundingly defeated by the DUP. The question now is how to interpret or extrapolate the National Assembly election results for December's presidential election.

In the parliamentary election, people have two votes, one for their district candidate and one for the party, and if you look at the party vote, the ruling party did not fare too well. Of course, the Saenuri Party did well in the southeast; that's a political constant. But people in the Seoul metropolitan area, who are much more unpredictable in nationwide elections, are used to being much more critical of the ruling party. The fact that the ruling party lost the capital could haunt them in the presidential election, though it is too early to make any predictions.

Lee Wang-hwi: I agree with much of what Prof. Ha said, but I wasn't quite as surprised by the ruling party's victory as I was that the legacy of former president Park Chung-hee still appears to be strong in some parts of Korea—of course in Gyeongsang Province in the southeast, Chungcheong, and Gangwon. In this election, the main player for the ruling party was not President Lee, but party leader Park Geun-hye, daughter of former president Park, and I think the fact that she will be a strong contender for president in December was a major factor in many of the electorate's choices for National Assembly members.

People still think of Park Chung-hee during elections because Korea is still in that Cold War situation or mindset. The North Korean threat is still on the minds of the older generation and they remember Park's hard line on Communism. The Cheonan incident and Yeonpyeong Island shelling only reinforced this. Park Geun-hye, as his daughter, is a representation and symbol of that "cold warrior." And I think the economic achievements that occurred under President Park also left a lasting impression, even though he was a dictator.

Shin Beom-shik: It is hard to define the Saenuri Party's victory as a real victory and the Democratic United Party's defeat as a real defeat. One thing that is really interesting to me is that the Korean electorate has a sense that things should be balanced. The outcomes of recent elections have been fairly tight and I see this as a sign that the Korean people don't want to give any single party too large of a majority. That being said, the DUP won more seats than in the last election and appeared to make solid progress, particularly in the Seoul area, which is always important in presidential elections.

Ha: You bring up a very good point. People like to talk about Park Geun-hye as being a big factor, particularly because she took the lead, rebranded her party, and proposed social welfare changes. But if she was such a big factor, you would have seen the ruling party do much better than it did in the Seoul area. Her party did well in Chungcheong largely because of her support for a single policy issue, the development of Sejong City in that region. And of course she won on her own turf in the southeast. But the Seoul region is a major testing ground, and she appeared to have failed in this critical area. The question is whether the Seoul region truly supports the DUP or is simply critical of the Lee Myung-bak government. To me, Park Geun-hye was unable to change the Seoul area's critical attitude toward Lee Myung-bak. And to go back to Prof. Shin's point about elections being very close in recent years, Korea has now experienced conservative and liberal presidencies over the last twenty years and many people haven't seen much difference. That South Korean people don't see much difference between the two parties we should take as an indicator of disapproval of both parties.

Shin: Through this election, Park Geun-hye has significantly reinforced her position in her party. But the DUP opposition is in a situation where it doesn't have a central figure to lead as the presidential election draws near. And that may have been a factor in the parliamentary election.

Ha: Korean political leaders should understand that the Korean people are generally tired of both parties. Unless they come up with better policy ideas that can attract people's interest, this will continue.

And that will hold true for both Park Geun-hye and the opposition party. The Seoul metropolitan area, for instance, is home to one-fourth of the entire population of the country, and if any presidential candidate—including Park—can't win there, he or she will have a difficult time winning in December.

Lee: The parliamentary election is one thing, the presidential election is another. To me, it's too early and there are so many ups and downs. This uncertainty is a Korean political tradition.

Ha: True. I don't think people vote in the parliamentary election the same way they do in the presidential election. There's a tendency to extrapolate too much from the National Assembly election, in which people tend to vote in terms of candidate character, regional ties, and party identification. It's almost impossible to pinpoint which, if any, of these issues will be important for the presidential election.

The run up to the parliamentary election and most of last year saw the DUP really taking the lead on social welfare initiatives and in the fight against the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA), forcing the conservative party to respond with its own proposals. What effect did this have on the election outcome? Does this signify a more liberal shift in Korean politics?

Ha: I don't think these policy issues were truly significant in this campaign. The opposition party failed to take advantage of the defensive posture of the Lee Myung-bak administration. They tried to make an issue out of the FTA, but that was a done deal. It had already gone into effect. They also made canceling the implementation of a naval base on Jeju Island a

major part of the campaign. But this doesn't have much effect on daily life for most people outside Jeju. So the fact that most people in the Seoul metropolitan area voted for the DUP is a sign that people rendered a judgment on the current administration.

Lee: Economic interests or social reform issues were not the main factors in this election. If you look at those who opposed the KORUS FTA, most were from rural or agricultural areas that will likely be adversely affected by the deal. But in one bit of irony, the southeastern region voted overwhelmingly for the Saenuri Party and for the FTA, even though for many people in that area, a vote for the FTA would be against their economic interests.

Ha: You really have to highlight this continuous persistence of regionalism in Korean politics. Even if Park Geun-hye or the opposition party wanted to expand on their policy issues, somehow the Korean people don't vote by issue areas. They mostly go with personal and regional connections.

Shin: Yes, regionalism still plays a role. But maybe we need to look at the attitude of the electorate. In Seoul, people care more about policy issues than they do in the provinces, where regional interests are more important. If you look at social welfare, there isn't much difference between policy proposals from the ruling party and opposition party. The only difference is which one of their plans is more fiscally feasible, so it's hard for ordinary people to distinguish the two parties' policies on this issue. Maybe if a presidential candidate can put out a reliable plan for social welfare reform, make a clear distinction from what has come before, and make it appear affordable, then he or she might be able to win over some people.

Ha: If you look at the Korean populace, you see that most people feel alienated by the political parties. And the party or individual who has the better chance in December will likely be the one who understands this alienation and tries to forge some kind of emotional connection with voters, before even coming up with policy proposals.

What are the implications of this election for U.S. policymakers or the U.S. audience in general?

Ha: From now until the presidential election I don't think we're likely to see much progress in the National Assembly on important issues, including ones that involve the United States, such as the FTA and North Korea policy. I don't see this election having any kind of direct impact on Korea-U.S. relations in the near term, but in the future, particularly after the presidential election, there could be new developments. The United States should obviously pay attention to who might be elected in December, and understanding the mood of Korean society, particularly how it feels toward the United States, could be an important indicator for future Korea-U.S. relations.

Lee: Foreign policy was not a big issue in this election, but the opposition party did make repealing the FTA a part of their campaign. I think it's too late now because it has already gone into effect. Additionally, there's enough support for the FTA even within the opposition party, because it's not just an economic agreement but also deals with security, as the U.S. is Korea's main ally and partner. There may be attempts to revise certain articles of the FTA, but with another election this December and an upcoming presidential election in the United States, there won't be much movement on it this year.

I think the most important issue for the U.S.-Korea relationship in the future will be sharing the defense burden. The U.S. has slashed its defense budget over the next few years, and this has huge implications for the alliance system in Northeast Asia. As U.S. spending goes down, South Korea will have to make up for some of that to keep a strong U.S. military presence on the peninsula, and that's likely to be a major debate in the Korean government.

Can you explain the differences between the two major Korean political parties when it comes to U.S. military presence in South Korea? How do they view the United States' role?

Lee: I think the main DUP opposition is conservative by Western standards, at least on this issue, but the United Progressive Party (UPP) is far to the left. The alliance between these two opposition parties could give the UPP more-than-usual leverage on U.S. military presence in Korea, and you could potentially see the UPP gain some concessions from the main opposition party for its support during the presidential campaign. Both the DUP and Saenuri generally believe that U.S. military presence is beneficial, though the DUP has more reservations.

Ha: There aren't too many variations in policy points between the two major political parties, but they do tend to drum up or amplify the minor differences. I think that can be challenging for the U.S. to try to understand—whether these two parties are in complete disagreement, which often appears to be the case, or whether small differences are just being amplified. There's a Korean saying that Korean people get friendlier through fighting. I think you can see that in government, when issues are heatedly debated at first but then are addressed in a more calm and realistic manner.

Shin: Like Prof. Ha said, understanding the mood of the Korean electorate is very important when it comes to politics. In recent years the Korean people have been exposed to a very hard international reality in relation to North Korea and East Asia: the Cheonan incident, Yeonpyeong Island shelling, and China's rise and its attitude toward the Korean peninsula. Koreans have this sense that things are more confrontational on a regional level, so I think there's still this feeling

that South Korea needs to maintain its alliance with the United States and that cooperation is essential, particularly in national security. This mood will continue for the time being, I think, which would appear to bode well for Korea-U.S. relations.

Recent news reports seem to indicate that the increasingly popular Seoul National University graduate school dean and software guru Ahn Cheol-soo, who has highlighted disparity and other economic issues in Korean society, is planning to run for president as an independent. But while Ahn’s political views appear to line up more with the liberal opposition, part of his appeal is that he has maintained an above-the-fray persona. If he runs for president, how might he approach this dilemma? What makes Ahn an appealing candidate in Korea?

Ha: Ahn Cheol-soo has several options. Since he doesn’t have any organizational base, there was some thought that he might tilt toward accepting an invitation from the opposition party to run as a DUP candidate. However, if Ahn gets swamped in the internal struggles of the opposition party, while failing to bring any new emotional appeal or a unique policy agenda, then his popularity could wane. A second option could be for him to organize his own party comprised of political “dropouts” from the two main parties, and bring in other aspirants from those around him. In other words, the dilemma for him

is that if he identifies too much with the opposition party his image may be damaged, but if Ahn doesn’t work with the DUP he won’t have any organizational base, at least initially. Another key question for him is to what extent he is prepared to run—psychologically, intellectually, and in terms of political agenda.

Both political parties are experiencing dissatisfaction from the Korean public, which likes new entrants in politics because they view older politicians as corrupt. Ahn is considered by many to be a highly educated, self-made man, and he is also younger than most politicians. These factors would appear to be in his favor.

However, I don’t think people fully understand the implications of Ahn as a presidential candidate, and Ahn himself may not yet either. Throughout a presidential campaign, candidates are constantly vetted through debates and interviews, and it remains to be seen how deep a thinker Ahn Cheol-soo is, and whether he is ready for the long campaign. ♦

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