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President Moon Jae-in – The Right Choice for South Korea

The success of President Moon’s minority government will depend on whether he can unite a divided society and to what degree the public and opposition are willing to support his planned reforms.

The presidential election that took place in South Korea on May 9, 2017, produced a clear winner. The Democratic Party candidate, Moon Jae-in, received 41.1 percent of the vote, thus becoming the country’s 19th president (Fig. 1). With that, he defeated his most formidable opponent, Hong Jun-pyo, the conservative candidate representing the Liberty Korea Party. At 24.0 percent, Hong received 5.6 million fewer votes. That is the largest difference between the top candidates in a presidential election since South Korea’s democratization in 1987.

A total of 15 candidates ran for office – the most that Korea has ever seen in a presidential race. Voter participation was 77.2 percent, higher than for any election

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of the last 20 years (Fig. 2). With the advent of the Moon presidency, South Korea has now experienced its third peaceful transfer of power between opposition and government, following the election of the liberal Kim Dae-jung in 1997 and the right-wing conservative Lee Myung-bak in 2008 – one of the occurrences that political scientists consider a key sign of democratic consolidation. This election does indeed seem to be continuing that trend in South Korea.

President Park brings about her own downfall

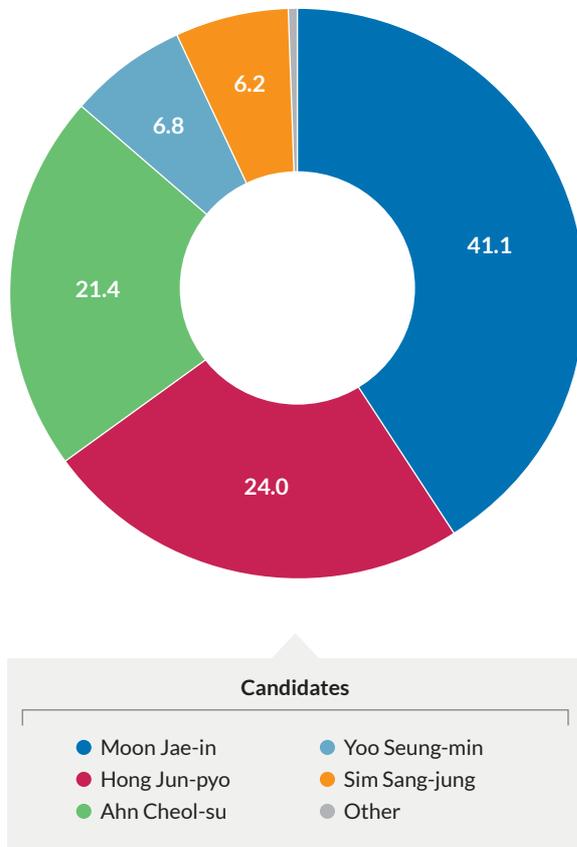
Strictly speaking, this was a by-election made necessary by the impeachment of the previous president, the conservative Park Geun-hye, who was forced from office on March 10, 2017. Park is the daughter of military dictator Park Chung-hee, who came to power in a putsch in 1961 and who ruled until 1979 when he was assassinated by the man he had appointed to lead the country’s intelligence agency. Park Geun-hye narrowly

won the 2012 presidential election, receiving only 3.6 percent more votes than Moon Jae-in, who was running as the opposition candidate for the first time.

That presidential election was overshadowed by fraud perpetrated by parts of the security apparatus and military. Once Park took office in 2013, it quickly became clear how unsuited she was to govern the country. Newspaper editors were put under pressure, people loyal to the ruling government were installed as the directors of media outlets, charges were brought against a Japanese journalist for “slandering” the president, and artists critical of the government were blacklisted. Demonstrations were in some cases forbidden or blocked, and demonstrators were seriously injured with water cannons. There was even one fatal victim.

Park’s responses to investigations of election fraud, the outbreak of the MERS virus, the Sewol capsizing

Figure 1: Election results, top five candidates (in %)



Source: Korean National Election Commission (www.nec.go.kr).

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and the introduction of the THAAD missile defense system were mostly unprofessional and undemocratic. Her decisions to ban the trade union for teachers and the left-wing United Progressive Party were questionable at best. Park had promised to democratize the economy and improve social welfare benefits, but instead promoted deregulation at every turn and took a passive stance regarding the ever-growing gap between rich and poor (income inequality, etc.).

In terms of foreign policy, she began moving in the wrong direction, namely backwards. The so-called Trust Policy designed to engage with North Korea soon proved to be the opposite, in that demands were made for North Korea to normalize relations and conditions were imposed that Pyongyang could not fulfill without jeopardizing its own existence. The result was a further worsening of the already frosty relations between the two countries, which in turn led to increasingly belligerent rhetoric soon followed by the closing of the *Kaesong* special economic zone.

At the same time, the Park administration aligned itself even further with the interests of the United States, which under President Barack Obama had begun pursuing a passive-aggressive policy of “strategic patience,” thus contributing to the worsening of relations. Because of its decision to make itself even more dependent on the US, South Korea consequently lost the opportunity to play a leading role in the region and, above all, pursue a forward-looking policy towards North Korea. At the end of Park’s time in office, moreover, the US stationed its controversial THAAD missile defense system in South Korea – which only further worsened the political climate in the region, since the system can also be used to spy on China, which Beijing views as a provocation and which therefore weighs on the relationship between the two countries.

As for its policy towards Japan, the Park government pursued a zigzag course. During her first months in office, President Park distanced herself from Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at international gatherings, even avoiding eye contact, only to reach an agreement with Japan in December 2015 without consulting either Korea’s parliament or the public. The subject of the agreement was releasing the Japanese government from blame for the forced prostitution of Korean women by the Japanese military in the Second World War and restitution for the victims. The women themselves were not included in the decision-making process and the

Japanese succeeded in formulating the agreement in such a way that, if and when it comes into effect, it would bring the countries' conflict of many years to a "final and irrevocable" end.

When it was gradually revealed in autumn of 2016 that the president was involved in instances of corruption and coercion and in the leaking of government secrets, and that her friend Choi Soon-sil had been allowed to participate in government and personnel decisions, the public finally began to express the discontent that had been building for years. Over the course of months, hundreds of thousands of people – later millions – took to the streets on weekends to demand that the president resign. A parliamentary committee and the public prosecutor's office – and later a special prosecutor – began investigating Park's actions. The pressure on her continued to grow to such an extent that a majority of the country's political parties, including members of Park's own ruling party, felt compelled to begin proceedings in parliament to remove the president from office.

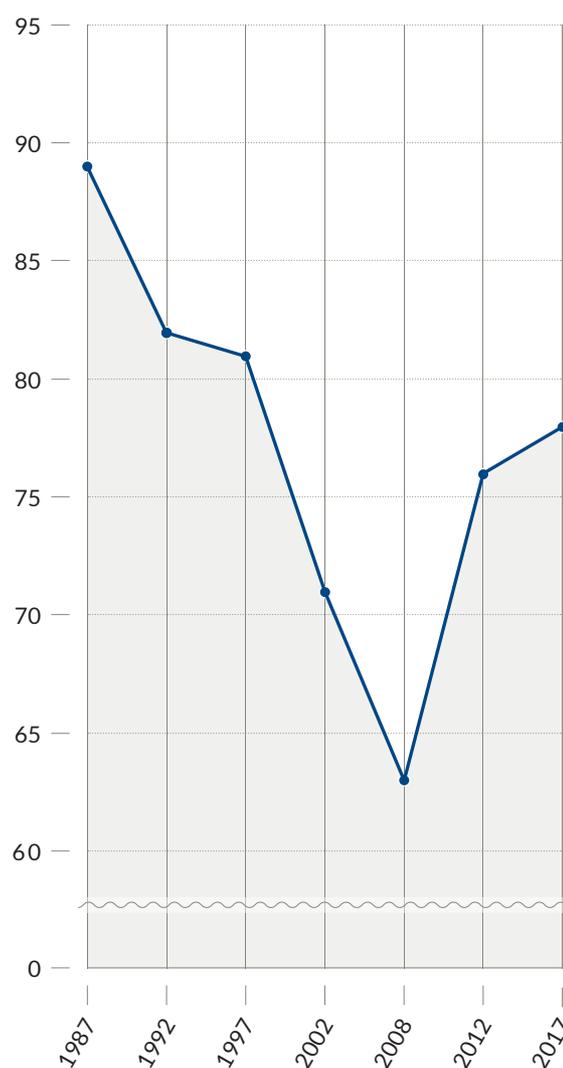
The Constitutional Court ultimately upheld the impeachment, which resulted in Park losing her political immunity and cleared the way for the public prosecutor to press charges. Since then Park has been detained and must appear multiple times each week at court dates, during which a total of 18 charges are being addressed.

Old patterns, new president

South Korea's election law states that when the country's highest office is vacated, the prime minister temporarily administers the government's affairs and a new election must be held within 60 days. During the presidential election that took place at the beginning of May, typical voting patterns became apparent among the country's electorate – regional preferences, in particular. While the liberal Moon did well primarily in the southwestern, liberal region of *Honam* (Gwangju and South and North Jeolla), the conservative, right-wing Hong received a majority of the votes in the traditionally conservative *Yeongnam* region (Busan, Daegu and South and North Gyeongsang) in the country's south-east (Fig. 3). The exceptions were Busan, the city in which Moon has spent most of his life, and Daegu. And even if these regional patterns were not as pronounced as in the past, their impact remains as strong as ever.

The conservatives had been weakened by the scandal involving their president, which is why many were surprised that the conservative, right-wing candidate Hong Jun-pyo, who likes to compare himself – and to some extent, deservedly so – with Donald Trump and to act like his American counterpart, managed to place second by gaining 24.0 percent of the vote. This is hardly surprising, however, since, on the one hand, a cohort of extremist thinkers exists in every country and, on the other, conservative voters fell in line behind Hong even if they were less than enthusiastic about him, since they feared the crisis among the country's conservatives would result in their losing

Figure 2: Voter participation in presidential elections 1987–2017 (in %)



Source: Korean National Election Commission (www.nec.go.kr).

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any chance of being part of the government. Moreover, due to their lackluster performance during the election campaign, the more moderate conservative candidates Yu Seung-min and Ahn Cheol-soo seemed to have little real chance of success.

In addition to regional patterns, age-group-related patterns were also apparent (Fig. 4). Above all, voters aged 60 and older have always tended to vote for conservative candidates, which has to do with their experiences, direct or indirect, of the Korean War. Another well-established pattern is that people with lower levels of education tend to vote for conservative, right-wing politicians. During the recent presidential election, this pattern can be indirectly seen when the results are compared to monthly salaries, even if the differences are not large (Fig. 5).

Overall, however, Moon was able to attract considerably more votes since the public's experience with the last two conservative governments – in particular, the scandal-ridden way the last one came to an end – had made a correspondingly negative impression on voters. Moon was at an advantage when compared to the moderate candidate Ahn Cheol-soo, since he has more

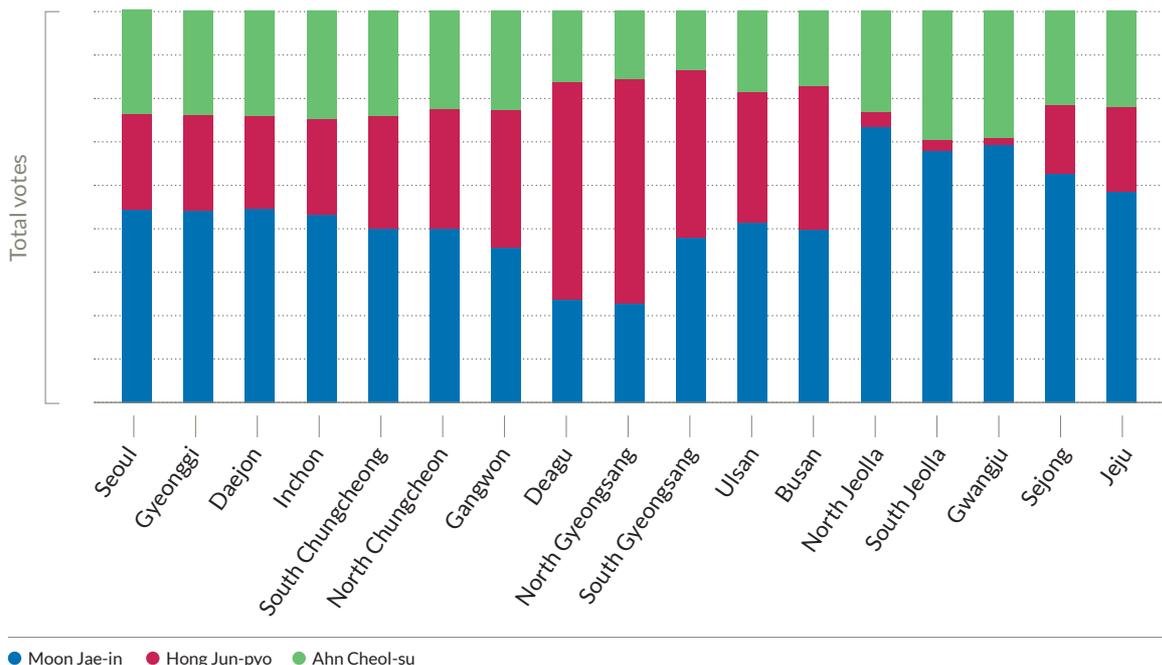
extensive political experience, not to mention more networks and more ideas. In addition, he seemed more convincing during his appearances before the public, which in turn made him seem more trustworthy.

In terms of content, Moon's program seemed to best reflect the zeitgeist as well. According to surveys carried out on the day of the election, most of the respondents said that reuniting the country's divided society and fighting corruption were the two most significant overall problems that the new government needed to address. More specifically, the survey's respondents said that the most pressing issue requiring attention was, by far, stimulating the economy and creating jobs (53.2%), followed by political reforms affecting the constitution (13.0%), improving relations with North Korea (10.5%), diplomatic relations with the US and China (10.4%) and the topics of social welfare and the redistribution of social goods (9.4%).

President Moon Jae-in

Moon Jae-in was born in 1953 on the island of Geoje near the port city of Busan in the country's southeast.

Figure 3: Election results by province (major cities and provinces)



Source: Korean National Election Commission (www.nec.go.kr).

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His family had been evacuated from the country's north during the Korean War and subsequently found itself living in adverse conditions. Yet his performance in school, above all, provided the young Moon with career opportunities. In the 1970s he studied law at Kyung Hee University in Seoul and passed his state examinations, allowing him to become a lawyer and civil servant. His goal was to become a judge, a career path he was excluded from since he had taken part in demonstrations during the military dictatorship of Park Chung-hee and had spent time in jail. He decided to work as a lawyer, which is how in the early 1980s he met Roh Moo-hyun, who was later to be elected president as a liberal candidate. Moon worked with Roh in the same legal practice where he primarily took on cases involving human rights violations or represented workers in legal disputes.

The two men got on so well – not only professionally, but also personally and in terms of their political views – that during his presidency Roh appointed Moon to serve as chief of staff in the Office of the President. In contrast to Roh, who had already begun his political career at the end of the 1980s as a member of parliament, this was Moon's first practical experience in the world of politics. After Roh left office, Moon spent two years leading the Roh Moo-hyun Memorial Foundation and only reentered politics when he became chairman of the largest opposition party and, in 2012, its candidate for president.

His five years in the Office of the President and his five years leading the opposition are valuable capital upon which Moon was able to draw as he mounted his second campaign for president and which will continue to serve him well as he commences his current term of office. This is true, above all, since it affords him a critical view of both the mistakes made during the conservative governments of the past nine years and the failures of the preceding liberal governments.

Symbolic acts and government leadership

Since taking office, President Moon has spent his time mostly revamping governance structures and carrying out a number of symbolic political acts. One of his first directives was to have the song *Imeul wihan haengjimgok* (*March for the Beloved*) played as an official hymn at the ceremony commemorating the Gwangju Uprising of 1980. The song had been prohibited for

nine years by conservative governments since, to this day, right-wing conservatives maintain that the uprising in Gwangju was instigated by North Korean soldiers in order to cause chaos within the country.

During his speech at the memorial ceremony on May 18, Moon repeated his promise to include the spirit of the Gwangju Uprising in the preamble to the constitution once it is revised. Moreover, the president has demonstrated that he is in touch with the people and their concerns. At press conferences he answers journalists' questions with deliberation and care, he speaks on the street with members of the public, he embraces those in mourning at commemorative events and has commented empathetically on online reports about searching for bodies following the sinking of the Sewol ferry in April 2014, during which more than 300 people perished.

What is also new is that Moon has appointed a relatively large number of women to high-level posts. For example, Jo Hyun-ok is now serving as the executive secretary for human resources management in the Office of the President, the first time that a woman has held that position. Moon also appointed a woman, Pi Woo-jin, to head the traditionally conservative Ministry for Patriots and Veterans. As his government's new foreign minister, moreover, he appointed Moon Kang Kyung-wha, who previously served as the UN's assistant secretary-general and its emergency aid coordinator. A Democratic Party representative, Kim Hyun-mee, has been assigned head of the Ministry for Land, Infrastructure and Transport. Kim Eun-kyung, an expert on sustainable development and preservation, has been put forward as the new environment minister, and Chung Hyun-back, history professor and leading figure in the civil society movement regarding matters of gender inequality and labor disparity, has been designated as the new head of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family. With Park Choon-ran and Lee Sook-jin having been appointed deputy ministers for education and gender respectively, the share of female members of Moon's cabinet is very close to the 30 percent he promised during his campaign.

Moon also nominated Constitutional Court Justice Kim Yi-su to fill the vacant post of president of the Constitutional Court. In 2014, Kim was the only justice to speak out against the decision made in the case, introduced by the conservative government, to prohibit the leftist United Progressive Party. In a statement he issued

in conjunction with the decision to remove President Park Geun-hye from office, he emphasized the severity of her infractions. Like the new prime minister, Lee Nak-yeon, Kim is originally from the Honam region, which has traditionally been underrepresented in the political and business spheres, and his appointment can undoubtedly be seen as an attempt to implement a regionally balanced staffing policy. As of now, Moon seems to be fairly successful in appointing key personnel evenly from the regions of Yeongnam, Honam and the Seoul metropolitan area with about 30 percent each. The disproportionate high share of about 43 percent

of graduates from the country's top university, Seoul National University, in the new administration leaves room for improvement on the matter of balanced personnel policy. Overall, however, it is clear that President Moon is making his staffing decisions based on three main criteria: professionalism, diversity and a desire to carry out reforms. The success of this staffing policy depends, however, not only on the qualifications of the people nominated, but on the opposition's willingness to cooperate during the parliamentary confirmation hearings.

Figure 4: Election results by age group (in %)



Source: Joint survey carried out at polling stations by TV broadcasters KBS, MBC and SBS. | BertelsmannStiftung

Labor market and energy/ environmental policy

According to the OECD's *Better Life Index*, South Korea's scores in the areas of income distribution, work-life balance, health, life satisfaction and the environment are considerably lower than the OECD average. As a result, President Moon is carrying out a number of employment-related programs, for example to create 810,000 jobs in the public sector, in particular as a way of reducing the unemployment rate among young people, which is currently over 10 percent. In addition, he wants to reduce the official work week from 68 hours to 52 hours and replace temporary and limited-term work contracts with permanent contracts. He also wants to introduce quotas at private-sector businesses for hiring young people while also providing the businesses with incentives to do so. Moreover, he plans to raise the minimum wage from €5 to €8, drastically reduce tuition at universities and make childcare affordable.

Moon also wants to halt South Korea's use of nuclear power and reduce its reliance on coal-fired power plants while expanding its use of renewable energies. Two ageing coal-fired plants have already been shut down; the work on two nuclear power plants still under construction is to be stopped and the antiquated Wolsong nuclear plant taken offline completely. The relevant authorities are currently checking to see whether and how the programs for straightening rivers and building dams, which were commenced under President Lee Myung-bak and repeatedly criticized by experts as environmentally destructive, can be reversed.

The Sisyphean challenge of chaebol reform

Moon promised to create a political system and society that are fair and just and an economy that is democratic,

something he wants to achieve by combating corruption and reforming the conglomerates (*chaebol*) that dominate the business sector. He has therefore convened an oversight commission (*cheongyeomwi*), whose main responsibility is evaluating, developing and implementing policies, regulations and further education programs capable of combating corruption.

In addition, more protection is to be given to whistleblowers, the use of juries is to be made obligatory in the most egregious cases of corruption, and a systematic process is to be introduced that allows individual citizens to take legal steps against government institutions that have misused or wasted tax revenues. The efforts to reform the country's conglomerates include requirements to increase transparency in corporate governance, and regulations that will prevent excessive influence from being exerted on corporate leaders by members of an enterprise's founding family. For example, cross-shareholding is to be limited, something which has made it possible until now for family patriarchs to dictate how a company is run despite only formally owning 5 percent of all shares.

In terms of holding companies, conditions and regulations are to be made more stringent and the minimum number of shares increased. These measures are designed to eliminate the byzantine structures that make it possible for founding families to exert de facto control over a company, even though this is not permitted de jure and, at least to outward appearances, does not seem to be the case. In addition, it will be possible for small shareholders to initiate class action lawsuits. The president's ability to grant amnesty when an economic crime has been committed is also to be severely reduced. Moreover, the new president intends to use the restructured Fair Trade Commission (*gongjeongwi*) to prevent the exploitation of small and mid-sized companies by the conglomerates. Despite fierce protest by the conservative opposition parties that traditionally are closer to big business, Moon has appointed business professor Kim Sang-jo, one of the most outspoken critics of the conglomerates, to lead the agency. Harsher penalties that would prove painful even to the major conglomerates are also planned.

Political reforms – Constitution and public prosecutors

Moon's plan is to reform the country's presidency so that, in contrast to current practice, the president can be reelected following a first four-year term, as is the case in the US. The objective is to reduce the lame-duck phase that occurs at the end of the president's single five-year term by introducing the prospect of another term of office, thereby increasing motivation. Government programs, which by their very nature must take a longer-term view, would also become more realistic and sustainable. For these changes to be implemented, however, the constitution would have to be amended, which requires approval by a two-thirds majority in parliament and subsequent approval by two-thirds of the electorate in a national referendum. The chances of these hurdles being overcome are not bad at the moment, since all five of the major candidates expressed support for such a reform in the run-up to the election.

A key point on Moon's agenda is the reform of the public prosecutor's office. Following democratization and during the subsequent liberal governments, the police, military and state security agencies were gradually made more democratic. The public prosecutor's office, however, remained largely untouched and thus enjoys disproportionate power and influence. Prosecutors can launch investigations and terminate them again without answering to another public authority. They have their own judicial police force at their disposal and have the authority to issue directives to all other law enforcement officials, who are legally bound to cooperate.

Public prosecutors have the exclusive right to press charges. The public prosecutor's office is centrally organized, with the minister of justice at the top of a highly hierarchical pyramid. In terms of international peers, almost no other government prosecutor enjoys the abundance of power that South Korean prosecutors do, with the exception of those in Russia. The result is corruption within the public prosecutor's office. Moreover, prosecutors intimidate politicians, business leaders and public officials by launching investigations, or refuse to press charges when that would be warranted.

A more aggressive system of public prosecution based on the German model was introduced in Korea at the beginning of the 20th century during colonial rule by the Japanese. For years it proved effective as

an instrument of power wielded on behalf of authoritarian regimes. Unfortunately, even after the country's democratization, public prosecutors proved helpful to many presidents by exerting illicit pressure under the guise of ensuring "law and order." Their extensive jurisdiction during investigations makes public prosecutors virtually unassailable, even in instances where they violate the law, since only a public prosecutor – and not, for example, the police – can open a case against another public prosecutor.

Wanting to keep his election promise and achieve meaningful change, Moon is attempting to contain the extensive power enjoyed by the country's public prosecutors by introducing democratic controlling mechanisms into the system. An oversight office for examining cases of corruption by high-level civil servants (*gongsucho*) is to be created, which will have the authority to monitor judges and other prominent office holders – above all, public prosecutors – and, when necessary, instigate legal proceedings against them. Moreover, the police are to be given some of the authority to launch investigations currently granted public prosecutors. This would add another degree of democratic oversight to the system. Finally, no exchange of personnel is to take place in the future between the public prosecutor's office and the Ministry of Justice to which it reports, since in the past this situation was repeatedly used to thwart any effective oversight of public prosecutors. In addition, the Moon administration plans to introduce an enhanced public defender system (*hyeongsa gongongbyeonhoin jedo*) to offer legal aid to low-income citizens in criminal cases starting with the investigation phase, a service the existing state-hired attorneys cannot provide, thus better protecting citizens' human rights vis-à-vis prosecutors.

Oversight of the Ministry of Justice and the public prosecutor's office currently rests with the director of civil affairs in the Office of the President. President Moon has appointed Cho Kuk to this position, a professor of criminal law at the National University in Seoul and a vocal critic of public prosecutors. His appointment of Yoon Seok-yeol to head the general prosecutor's office in Seoul also demonstrates Moon's determination to follow through on his election promises. Yoon was appointed special prosecutor to investigate fraud during the 2012 presidential election, but was soon removed from his post as retribution for having brought evidence to light incriminating the Park government.

In the future, NIS (*gukjeongwon*), the national intelligence agency, will only be authorized to carry out investigations abroad and will no longer be able to collect information of any sort within South Korea itself. The goal is to avoid abuses of power like those that have repeatedly been seen in the past. Moreover, the national human rights commission is to be given more power and will issue a report to the president on a regular basis.

Moon's special envoys and the revival of diplomatic relations

In terms of foreign policy, in his first month in office Moon succeeded in engineering a change of course with the country's most important partners by sending special envoys to the US, China, Japan, the EU (Germany) and Russia only one week after becoming president. During talks in Washington, the Trump Administration assured Hong Seok-hyun, the special envoy to the US, that it was interested in continuing its close relationship with South Korea. It also said it did not want to attack North Korea or implement regime change there.

During his state visit to China, Special Envoy Lee Hae-chan was informed by the Chinese government that it is interested in normalizing relations and will take the necessary steps to that end. One of the main points of contention is the stationing of the THAAD missile defense system in South Korea, and Moon wants parliament to decide on the system's future deployment. China is not only South Korea's largest trading partner by far, it also plays a key role geopolitically given the issue of North Korea.

Japan, too, signaled to South Korea's special envoy, Moon Hee-sang, that it was interested in reconciliation. A number of issues on which the two nations have had major differences of opinion – the agreement for compensating the so-called "comfort women", historical misrepresentations in Japanese school textbooks and the territorial conflict in the East Sea – are now to be treated in a forward-looking manner. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has supported President Moon's position of addressing the issue of North Korea together with the US and Japan, while also entering into direct dialogue with North Korea in order to improve relations and reduce potential risks in the region.

In Russia, Special Envoy Song Young-kil suggested re-viving the plan for laying a gas pipeline across Siberia to South Korea which was shelved by South Korea's conservative governments. For the current government, this project offers the opportunity of bringing North Korea onboard economically and, at the same time, expanding South Korea's available energy supplies.

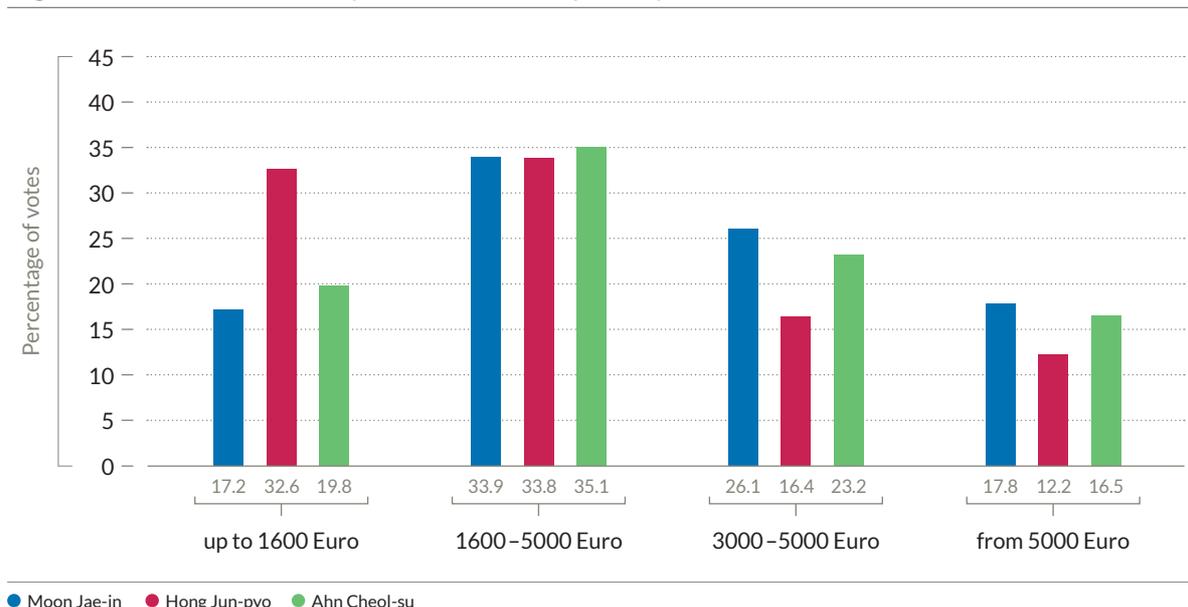
In terms of the European Union, Special Envoy Cho Yoon-jae was assured by the Europeans that they would be willing to participate in efforts to resolve the nuclear question on the Korean Peninsula, even if President of the European Council Donald Tusk made no concrete promises in this regard. Korea, in turn, is interested in benefitting from the experience the EU gained during the nuclear talks with Iran. The meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel was also very positive, as she expressed great interest in having even closer ties to South Korea. Other issues, including free trade agreements, economic cooperation, efforts to combat terrorism, and climate policies, were also discussed during most of the talks with the special envoys, even if North Korea was often the focal point.

North Korea – Sunshine Policy 3.0

Moon Jae-in's North Korea policy does not differ greatly from Kim Dae-jung's and Roh Moo-hyun's. In some respects, however, it is an updated third version. The biggest difference from the previous conservative governments and their hardliners is that no demands for a dialogue or summit are being made that North Korea cannot fulfill. Beginning a conversation is Moon's primary concern, something that shall, consequently, be decoupled from ideological attitudes, even those present in South Korea. For Moon, the key factor for improving relations is continuing the positive achievements of past governments, such as the joint statement of the 1970s, the reconciliation agreement of the early 1990s and the joint declaration made during the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun governments.

The idea is to sign an agreement that has again been ratified by the national parliaments of both countries as a way of increasing the predictability and stability of inter-Korean politics. Moreover, this would create a legally binding foundation that would remain even as governments change. On the South Korean side, this process of developing and improving the country's North Korea policy foresees an active role for civil society in addition to the one played by the national parliament. The goal is to achieve a consensus and

Figure 5: Election results by income (monthly salary in euros)



Source: Joint survey carried out at polling stations by TV broadcasters KBS, MBC and SBS.

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active support within society to ensure the policy is sustainable.

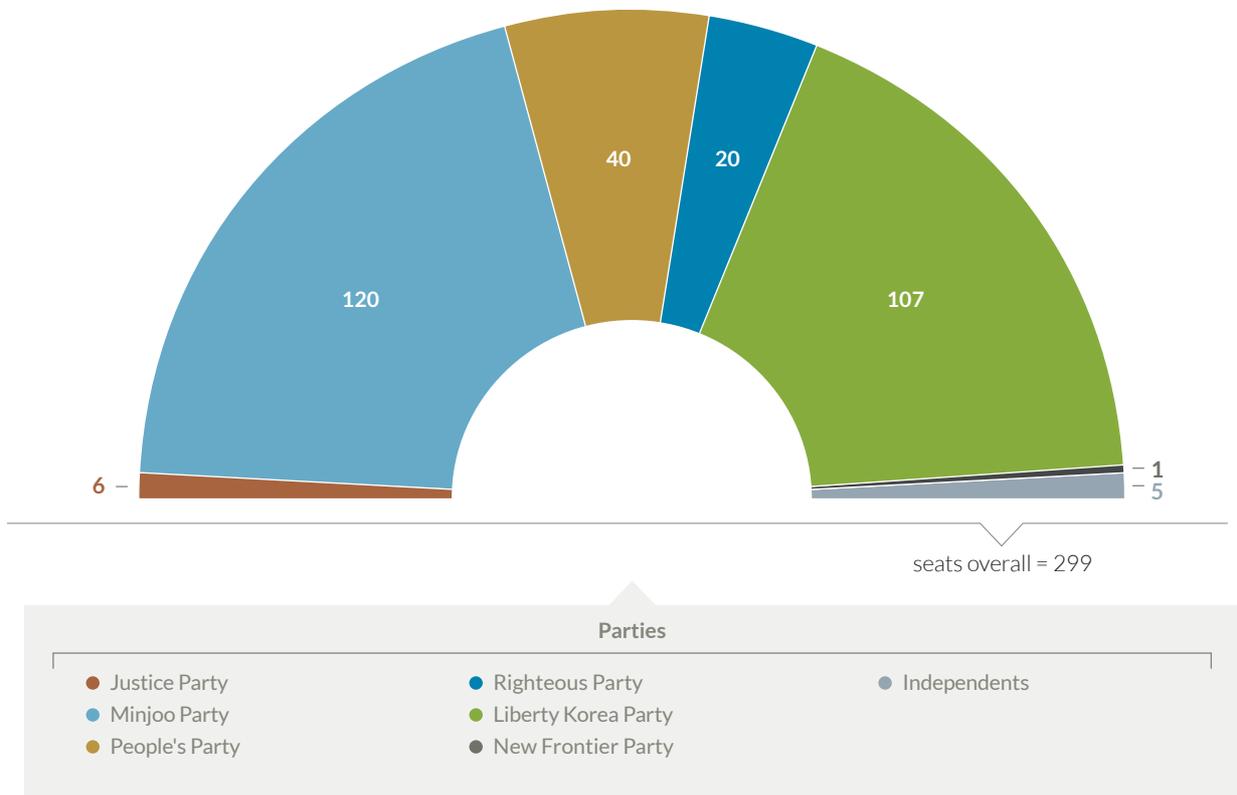
The Moon administration wants to take its initial steps towards reconciliation by reaching agreement with North Korea on a number of issues in the civilian realm, including reuniting families that have been separated, joint use of water resources in the border area, joint efforts to combat malaria, and participation by North Korean athletes in the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea. Public administrators in provinces bordering North Korea and businesses operating there are also to be allowed to actively cooperate with their counterparts to the north. Moreover, Moon has proposed creating an economic community in the areas of production, consumer goods and exports. To that end, the Kaeseong Industrial Complex is to be reopened as soon as possible and significantly expanded in the future. It will then become part of the still-to-be-developed West Sea economic belt, which would make use of the existing western rail connection

(which could theoretically be extended to Beijing) to connect the Seoul metropolitan area with Kaesong and Pyongyang, and the Sinuiju special economic zone.

A rail connection also exists to the east and together with the tourist complex in North Korea's *Geumgang* mountains, which is to be reopened, the economic belt is to extend via the *Naseon* special economic zone to Russia. The biggest challenge here is that the UN has imposed sanctions on North Korea and further sanctions are planned, to which South Korea must adhere by, among other things, seeing to it that North Korea does not profit economically.

Parallel to proactive rapprochement achieved by decoupling political issues from shared civil and economic projects, Moon sees the need for a robust defense mechanism in the form of a kill-chain antimissile system which South Korea would develop as an effective means of protecting itself against low-flying missiles and aircraft. At the same time, North and South Korea

Figure 6: Political parties in the national parliament (as of May 28, 2017; number of seats)



Source: National Assembly (www.assembly.go.kr).

are to introduce a joint military management system in order to prevent potential misunderstandings and mishaps. In addition, Moon wants South Korea to regain wartime operational control (OPCON) over its armed forces, which is now held by the US, so that the country can make its own decisions in case of war.

This, however, does not signify a withdrawal from the country's alliance with the US. On the contrary, the Moon administration continues to see Washington as the most important guarantor of the country's security. At the same time, it would like more autonomy for South Korea to address issues in the region. It is thus seeking a partnership among equals. Its declared goal is to ensure that North Korea suspends its nuclear weapons program and, ultimately, abandons it. By combining dialogue-driven rapprochement with sanctions, the country ultimately hopes to sign an agreement that would bring peace to the Korean Peninsula.

Conclusion

The program of reforms put forward by President Moon Jae-in is very ambitious. Even if he were to achieve in his five-year term of office only half of what he has proposed, it would be a major step towards creating a free, democratic and fair society. One of the biggest political challenges, however, is governing with only a minority of representatives in the national parliament (40%; see Figure 6). By relying on a minority government, Moon runs the risk that the opposition will block key reforms in order to protect its own or others' interests and/or simply to make the new president's job more difficult. In the first two months of his term, President Moon has already faced severe obstruction by the conservative opposition parties who are attempting to prevent reformist candidates from being appointed to government posts. As a result, Moon has to work with some of the preceding conservative administration's ministers. Due to the delayed appointment of the new foreign minister, he has also had to wait almost two months since his inauguration to begin replacing the nation's overseas ambassadors, changes that are taking place during important diplomatic exchanges with key countries. Given the gridlock in the national assembly, neither the revised supplementary budget (*chugyeong*) nor the new Government Organization Act (*jeongbujojik-peop*) have been adopted, both of which are crucial

preconditions for the implementation of Moon's reform program.

While the main role of opposition parties indeed is to question the incumbent government and hold it accountable to the public, this has to happen in an appropriate manner, that is, in a way that does not obstruct the government per se and from the very beginning. The government should be given the chance to demonstrate whether it is willing and able to perform. In this regard, the regional elections in June 2018 will, at the latest, serve as a first barometer showing the degree to which the new administration has been able to implement the desired reforms. In general, however, the prospects for the country under the Moon government are promising compared to what would have been the case had one of the other candidates been elected president.

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