



Presidential Election in South Korea: A Status Note

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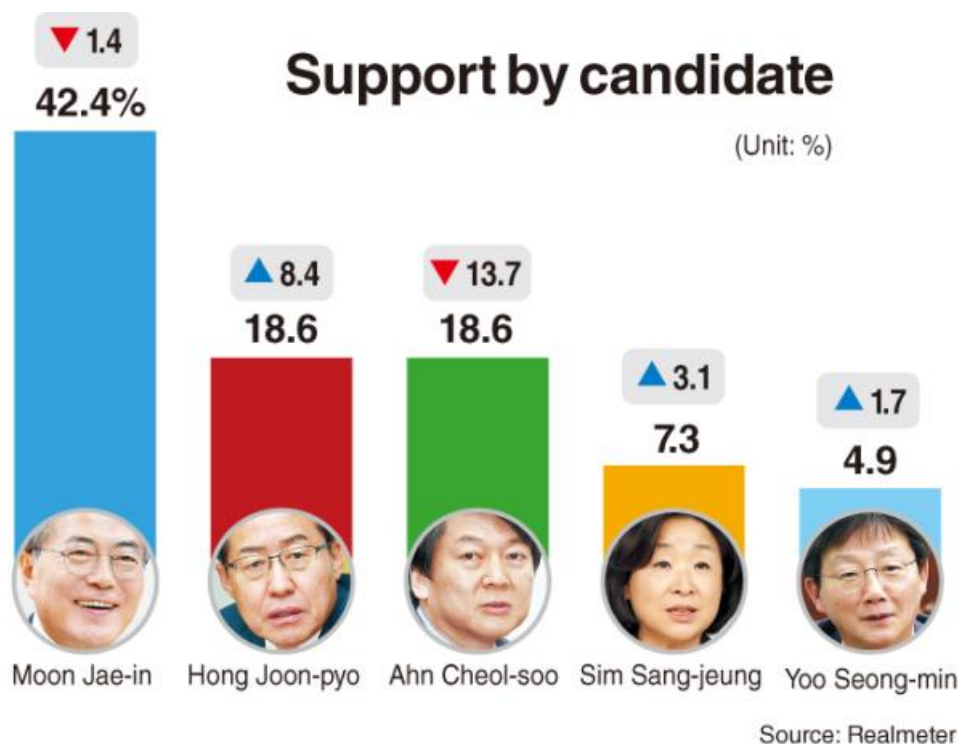
Former President of South Korea, Park Geun-hye was impeached by the National Assembly on 9 December 2016. It was followed by her removal from the office on 10 March 2017, by the Constitutional Court of Korea, marking the first time in history that an incumbent president has been ousted by impeachment.¹ Main Charges against her included corruption, influence peddling, and dereliction of duty. The 19th South Korean presidential election is scheduled to be held on 9 May 2017, as according to the law in South Korea, the election should take place within 60 days of the office being vacant. The president is directly elected for a single five-year term by plurality vote. At present, there are five presidential candidates contesting the election. Table 1 shows names of those five presidential candidates with their political alignment.

Table 1: The Presidential Candidates

Sl No.	Presidential Candidates	Political Parties	Ideological Base
1	Moon Jae-in	Democratic (Minjoo) Party of Korea	Liberal
2	Hong Joon-pyo	Liberty Korea Party (former Saenuri Party)	Conservative
3	Yoo Seong-min	Bareun Party	Conservative
4	Sim Sang-jung	Justice Party	Left-wing
5	Ahn Cheol-soo	People's Party	Moderate

Moon of the Democratic Party of Korea garnered 38-42.4 percent of support, maintaining a considerable lead over his four other main rivals, according to three pollsters – Realmeter,

Gallup Korea and Hankook Research.² His party also has most seats in parliament. Since last week, the main race which was believed to be between Moon Jae-in and Ahn Cheol-soo has shifted to a situation in which Moon enjoys a comfortable lead over Ahn and Hong Joon-pyo. Moon, candidate for the Democratic Party, is maintaining a solid support base of 40%³, while Ahn, candidate for moderate People’s Party, and Hong, candidate for the conservative Korea Liberty Party, were vying for second place amid volatility among conservative voters. While Hong jumped to the second spot by gaining 8.4 percentage points from the mid-April survey; Ahn Choel-soo of the center-left People's Party, saw his rating drop by 13.7 percentage points over the same period.⁴ Sim Sang-jeung of the far-left Justice Party came in fourth with 7.3 percent, while Yoo Seong-min of the conservative Bareun Party posted 4.9 percent.⁵ Yoo Seong-min and the other 32 lawmakers, who supported the parliamentary impeachment of former President Park Geun-hye had left Park former ruling party to set up a new party known as Bareun Party.⁶



Source: Pollster- Realmeter Dated – 03 May 2017.

In present circumstances, any elected President will have to take office without the traditional two months transition period, which means he/she cannot afford a delay in the appointment of key administration officials that require parliamentary endorsement.⁷ Because of this reason, candidates are making announcement of the names of their potential nominees for posts like prime minister, key cabinet members and senior presidential staffs in advance.

One of the important features of this Presidential election has been early voting, which took place on 04-05 May 2017, allowing voters to cast their ballots in advance anywhere in the

country. Early voting is separate from absentee voting, and is designed to boost voter turnout rates. Also according to the National Election Commission (NEC), the overseas voting had a record high turnout since the voting system was first introduced in 2012 at 75.3 percent, higher than the 71.1 percent for the presidential election that year, reflecting the overseas Koreans' high interest in the election following the presidential corruption scandal.⁸ The voting was for Korean nationals staying overseas, including those with permanent residency in other countries and those temporarily out of Korea for study, work or travel.

Major Issues and Policy Stand

THAAD

One of the most important issues for this presidential election is the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Air Defence (THAAD) system in the country. South Korea's progressive parties are campaigning to review this decision. It has been alleged that former President Park Geun-hye did not allow enough public discussion on the subject and quite suddenly decided to deploy THAAD in early-2016, after North Korea's missile and nuclear tests. Moon says he is committed to the US-Korea alliance as the foundation of Seoul's diplomacy but has expressed caution about the deployment of THAAD. He wanted to postpone deploying the U.S. advance anti-missile system until the new president takes office and can evaluate its benefits and drawbacks. He believed that he could use the threat of THAAD deployment to pressure China to restrain North Korea. Ahn strongly supports THAAD, as do the conservative candidates. And they all object to China's coercive tactics to try to pressure South Korea to cancel the missile defense system deployment. Ahn also said that there was no need to worry about Trump's remark as the US had agreed to pay for THAAD under Status of Forces Agreement. The problem is that THAAD has been deployed. Will Moon reverse this decision, if elected?

Nuclear Weapons

Democratic party candidate Moon Jae-in said that if elected, he would phase in mutual inter-Korean arms control and encourage "simultaneous action" from North Korea, the US and other countries to achieve "a comprehensive package" of ending North Korea's Nuclear programme, denuclearising and signing a peace agreement.⁹ Moon's message hinted at an increased role for South Korea instead of China, with Seoul taking the initiative in Korean Peninsula denuclearisation discussions. His message appeared to project him as a contender, who is 'strong on national security'.¹⁰ Other Conservative candidates prefer the US alliance to pressurise North Korea for denuclearisation. Hong strongly supports the anti-missile system. And he said if he is elected he will "immediately start discussions with the U.S. on the re-deployment of nuclear weapons" in South Korea.

Foreign policy and Security

The former Saenuri party, which is now Liberty Korea Party, is "security conservative,"¹¹ preferring to take a strong stance over appeasement on North Korean provocations. Former President Park had advocated a stronger South Korean military contribution to the U.S.-South Korea alliance, particularly in response to recent North Korean attacks and provocations. Conservatives have traditionally endorsed maintaining alliance and cooperation with the U.S. Following the

impeachment of the discredited conservative Park, the two leading presidential contenders in public opinion polls are liberal-leaning advocates for increased dialogue and engagement with North Korea. However the frontrunner, the Democratic Party's Moon Jae-in, stressed his support for sanctions against Pyongyang and the strong military alliance with the United States, and said any differences with U.S. policy could be handled through constructive diplomatic channels. However, Moon has not hesitated to use anti-U.S. rhetoric, and remains open to fostering relations with a China that increasingly seeks to limit U.S.-ROK alliance cooperation.

Hong is pitching himself as a “strongman” who can contend with “nationalist” leaders from the U.S., Japan, Russia and China. He wants to bring U.S. tactical nuclear weapons to South Korean soil and create a special marine force to better respond to North Korea.

Another contender, Ahn Cheol-soo with the People's Party, said he would engage in shuttle diplomacy with the U.S. and China to give the Korean people a greater voice to peacefully resolve the longstanding division at the heart of this crisis.

Welfare

Welfare in South Korea has recently become a political flashpoint and is likely to be a key election issue. Former Park administration originally ran on the attractive platform of expanding “welfare without raising taxes”. However, later on, increase in the other taxes angered people. Moon supports expanding welfare by increasing corporate tax, specifically on cash piles of the chaebol – large family-run conglomerates, which have been central to South Korea's “economic miracle,” but are increasingly blamed for holding back the economy.¹² Liberty Korea Party's new leadership has flip-flopped its position on this. They say that “excessive welfare would make people indolent,” but then also added that expanding welfare is impossible without increasing taxes.

Three of the five major presidential candidates pledge to raise the minimum wage to 10,000 won (\$8.8) an hour in three years, while the others promise to do so in five years.¹³ Moon Jae-in promised to raise the minimum wage to that level by 2020 from the current 6,470 won. Ahn Cheol-soo of the People's Party, vowed to increase the minimum wage to the same level, but at a slower pace. He said he can achieve the 10,000-won mark by the end of his term. The Justice Party's Sim Sang-jung, a lifelong labour activist, also vowed to boost the minimum wage to 10,000 won by 2020.¹⁴

LGBT

LGBT groups have been more actively involved in this election than ever before. The candidates' positions on LGBT rights can be judged by whether or not they plan to enact anti-discrimination legislation, which would include provisions banning discrimination against an individual on the basis of his or her sexual identity or orientation. On 20 April 2017, the South Korean chapter of Amnesty International released responses on eight human rights issues from candidates Moon Jae-in, Ahn Cheol-soo, Hong Joon-pyo, Sim Sang-jung, and Yoo Seong-min.¹⁵ Of the five, only left-wing Justice Party candidate Shim stated her intention to “pursue” anti-discrimination legislation. Conservative Liberty Korea Party candidate Hong said he “could not” pursue it, while the other

three candidates avoided giving a clear answer. Liberal Democratic Party of Korea candidate Moon and moderate People's Party candidate Ahn, who are respectively polling first and second in the race, expressed their opposition to discrimination but stressed the need for a societal consensus.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

Endnotes

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⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ "(Lead) Presidential Candidates clash over faults of former governments", *Yohap News agency*, 02 May 2017.

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¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Harry W.S. Lee, "South Korea's Next Presidential Candidates", *The Diplomat*, 19 February 2017.

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¹² Ibid.

¹³ Jung Min-ho, "Candidates promise big minimum wage hike", *The Korea Times*, 01 May 2017.

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¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵"Presidential candidates evasive on issue of LGBT rights", *The Hankyoreh*, 24 April 2017.

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