



Republic of Korea's New President: Issues and Challenges for Korean Peninsula

*Sudhakar Vaddi**

Ms Park Geun-hye has been elected as the sixth President of the Republic of Korea (South Korea). The daughter of the ex-dictator Park Chang-Hee has created history by becoming not only the first woman President of South Korea with 51.6 per cent of votes, but also the first woman president in Northeast Asia. Ms Park's victory has shown the South Korean voter's belief that she would evoke her father's strong charisma as President and address the country's economic and security woes. A majority of the voters who favoured Ms Park belong to the post-Korean War generation who believed that the present industrialised growth of the South Korean economy was possible because of the ex-dictator President Park Chang Hee. Hence, her father's legacy of Korea's economic development played a major role in the victory. Ms Park has promised 'economic democracy' to the Korean people.

The victory against the liberal left candidate Mr Moon Jae-in has revealed that the voters preferred stability over radical change in South Korea's economy. The new President has to address new problems and challenges of a slowing growth rate (2.4 per cent growth predicted this year by the central bank of South Korea); an increasing wealth gap between the rich and the poor; and also the constant military threat from North Korea.

On the contentious issues of inter-Korean relations and North Korea's nuclear ambitions, Ms Park took an unambiguous position which helped her win public confidence. She expressed her willingness to normalise Seoul's relations with Pyongyang as early as possible. Mr Moon Jae-in's campaign was based on 'Sunshine Policy', a combination of investments and aid to North Korea, which failed to translate into votes. Pyongyang's rocket launch just a week before the presidential election, favoured Ms Park to gain support on Pyongyang's 'provocative' act. The rocket launch was condemned by Ms Park's New Frontier (Saenuri) party and was also viewed as a violation of UN Security Council's resolutions of 1718 and 1874.

Despite criticising the failed 'inflexible' hard-line policy of the incumbent President Lee Myung-bak, Ms Park mobilised public support based on 'cautious rapprochement' with Pyongyang. During the election campaign she sought to decouple humanitarian aid from politics, and expressed a desire to meet the new young North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un to ensure normalisation of relations between the two Koreas. At the same time, she insisted that any major investment in North Korea would be conditional and it would depend on the rollback of Pyongyang's nuclear weapons programme. Further, Ms Park pressed for a new era of relations with North Korea, since the threat from Pyongyang remained grave. She also expressed confidence to bring Pyongyang to the negotiation table through 'trust-based diplomacy'. How far her agenda would get support from Pyongyang's regime is a major challenge. Therefore, Ms Park's agenda and its implementation are crucial for the peace and stability in the Korean Peninsula.

The recent tensions between South Korea and Japan over issues such as 'comfort women' and the Dokdo/Takeshima Island has incited more nationalistic elements in both countries. Perhaps, the Saenuri Party under Park Geun-hye is expected to play down such nationalistic sentiments and push for closer cooperation with Japan as part of alliance coordination with the United States. For this reason, it is hoped Ms Park Geun-hye's personal legacy as the daughter of the former president Park Chung-Hee, who was educated in Japan, might help repair Seoul's relations with Tokyo.

In order to provide stability in the Northeast Asian region by opening the gates to isolated North Korea through ‘diplomatic trust’ is a major task for Ms Park. The normalisation of inter-Korean relations is going to be a tough task for Ms Park since in the eyes of the North Korean leadership, the Conservatives in South Korea always strive for strong US-South Korea military alliance and support arms race, which escalates the tensions on the Korean Peninsula. Pyongyang has also expressed serious concerns about the annual US-South Korea joint military exercises in the Korean waters which can probably trigger tension in the peninsula.

The incumbent President Lee Myung-bak, of the Conservative party scrapped the ‘Sunshine’ and ‘Peace and Prosperity’ policies of both leaders late Kim Dea-Jung and Roh Moo Hyun, which had focused on ‘unconditional aid and support’ to North Korea. The outgoing President cancelled all development projects in North Korea including Mt. Kumgang tourist project and also scrapped the declarations on inter-Korean relations that were initiated by his predecessors. In that context, during the South Korean presidential elections, North Korea’s official media expressed that, Saenuri Party's regaining of power in South Korea meant an extension of the period of confrontation between the two Koreas.

In the past, the Conservative party could hardly influence DPRK’s actions. In fact, the Saenuri Party was condemned by the state run media during South Korea’s presidential elections when the party tried to mobilise people by criticising North Korea’s supreme leadership. It also raised serious concerns about Conservative party’s propaganda on North Korean regime which it depicted as ‘unpardonable and hideous provocation’ against Pyongyang. According to North Korean regime, progressive Left forces have always been the primary target for the conservative groups in South Korea.

In the above scenario, it may be a challenge for Ms Park as the new President of South Korea to obtain the support for her ‘North Korea agenda’. Moreover, if the US-South Korea – Japan military alliance grows stronger in the Korean Peninsula, it would be difficult to bring Pyongyang to the negotiation table. Winning North Korea’s confidence through normalisation of inter-Korean relations remains vital for peace and security in the Korean Peninsula.

** Sudhakar Vaddi, Research Intern at Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi.*