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'A political outsider assumes presidential office'

The election of Yoon Suk-Yeol in South Korea will likely deepen the existing social problems in the country reports Henning Effner in Seoul

Yoon Suk-Yeol, the candidate of the conservative party, won the presidential election in South Korea on 9 March – by a very narrow margin. How did he come out on top in the end?

It was indeed a very close race. Yoon received a total of 48.6 per cent of the votes and won by a razor-thin margin of 0.8 per cent. His opponent Lee Jae-Myung of the ruling Democratic Party (DP) got 47.8 per cent.

With Yoon, a political outsider assumes presidential office. Yoon rose to prominence as a prosecutor. He led the investigation into former president Park Geun-Hye that led to her impeachment and conviction for corruption in 2017. In 2019, Yoon became attorney general. However, after months of controversy over investigations into government officials, Yoon resigned from his post in March 2021. He then joined the conservative People Power Party (PPP), which made him its candidate.

The election campaign was described by many commentators as the dirtiest in the country's history. Yoon and Lee accused each other of corruption and abuse of power and tried by all means to discredit their opponents. The outcome of the elections was so tight because the PPP and the DP are two roughly equally strong, entrenched political camps. People over 60 years of age traditionally vote more conservatively, while voters in their 40s and 50s tend to vote for the Democratic Party. For both parties, it was therefore important to win the votes of young people in the election campaign. In the 2017 elections, the Democratic Party had a clear advantage here. This time, however, many young people voted for the conservative opposition out of dissatisfaction with the government and the ruling Democratic Party.

Where does young people's dissatisfaction come from?

The economic situation is becoming increasingly difficult for many young people. Particularly problematic are the rapidly rising rents and property prices, which the government has failed to get under control. Youth unemployment has also continued to increase.

In addition, there are deeper problems: South Korea actually sees itself as a meritocracy. However, young people experience on a daily basis that it is not one's own performance that is decisive for advancing in society, but above all one's family background and the privileges and personal networks associated with it. Social mobility has declined sharply. Almost two-thirds of Koreans under the age of 30 do not believe they will be able to climb the social ladder. Against this background, the extreme pressure to perform in Korean society leads to frustration among many young people and a general loss of confidence in politics. The numerous political scandals in the government and public administration reinforce this trend.

Feminism and the backlash against it are currently hotly debated in South Korea. To what extent did the issue play a role in the election campaign?

In terms of gender equality, South Korea lags far behind in international comparison. In the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index, South Korea ranks a dismal 102nd among 156 countries. The employment rate of women is almost 20 per cent lower than that of men. Attempts by the government to ensure more gender equality, however, have led to resistance among young men, who fear for their traditional privileges and increasingly have to compete with well-educated young women in the highly competitive labour market. A spreading anti-feminism can therefore be observed among young men.

In the election campaign, Yoon and his party have tried to turn this into political capital. For example, Yoon has blamed feminism for the low birth rate in South Korea and during the election campaign called for the abolition of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family. The 36-year-old PPP party leader Lee Jun-Seok even went so far as to compare feminists to terrorists.

However, the PPP's tactics have only partially worked. Almost 60 per cent of young men under 30 voted for Yoon in the elections. At the same time, however, the conservatives have alienated young women with their strategy. They voted with almost as large a majority for the opposing candidate Lee Jae-Myung of the DP.

In view of the close election result, the new president faces a divided

nation. What are the most pressing domestic problems he must now tackle?

South Korea is economically successful, but the social problems have been getting progressively worse for years. At 43 per cent, old-age poverty is by far the highest among all OECD countries. Social spending, on the other hand, is in the lower range at 12 per cent of GDP. Social security systems are underdeveloped, income inequality is rising. There are also many problems in the labour market. Meanwhile, about 40 per cent of the employed work in irregular jobs.

Nevertheless, Yoon announced that he would pursue a neoliberal economic policy that would stimulate economic growth primarily through deregulation and the unleashing of market forces. He rejected higher social spending during the election campaign. Therefore, we need to fear that the social problems will only get worse. Yoon's economic policy is likely to benefit mainly big powerful corporations. For the trade unions, on the other hand, difficult times are ahead.

Yoon has also announced a change of course in climate and energy policy.

Yes, he wants to reverse the phase-out of nuclear energy introduced under President Moon. He plans longer operating times for existing nuclear power plants and also wants to cancel the moratorium on two reactors under construction, which had been ordered by President Moon. With regard to the expansion of renewable energies, Yoon is rather cautious because he fears higher energy prices for companies.

How has South Korea reacted to Russia's invasion of Ukraine?

South Korea has taken a clear position against the invasion. The government supports the international sanctions against Russia. South Korea has stopped all transactions with the Russian Central Bank and banned the export of strategically important goods to Russia. During the election campaign, the war in Ukraine fuelled a dispute between Yoon and Lee over the appropriate way to deal with North Korea. While Yoon called for a tougher approach to North Korea, Lee advocated the continuation of President Moon's previous policy of dialogue and understanding.

Will there now be a reorientation of policy towards North Korea under Yoon?

That is to be expected. Yoon has criticised President Moon's North Korea policy for quite some time. While Yoon is in principle willing

to engage in dialogue with Pyongyang, however, his main focus is on deterrence. For example, he has demanded that South Korea build up capacities for a pre-emptive strike. Yoon also advocates for the deployment of additional American THAAD missile defence systems to protect the greater Seoul area from North Korean attacks.

It can be assumed that Yoon will coordinate his policy towards North Korea closely with the United States. Yoon's election victory has been received very positively in Washington, as his foreign policy ideas largely coincide with those of the United States. North Korea, on the other hand, views his election sceptically. The chances of a resumption of dialogue between Pyongyang and Seoul have certainly diminished with Yoon's election. That is certainly a cause for concern. After all, dialogue is ultimately the only way to defuse the conflict on the Korean peninsula.

What does the growing rivalry between the US and China mean for South Korea?

For Yoon, strengthening the alliance with the US, traditionally South Korea's most important ally, is a top priority. He will formulate his China policy in solidarity with the US. During the election campaign, Yoon announced his support for the Indo-Pacific strategy of the United States, and his intention to participate in the working groups of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), the security policy dialogue forum between the United States, Japan, India, and Australia. Yoon is also apparently considering formal membership in a 'QUAD-Plus'. His predecessor, Moon, had been rather reluctant to do so out of consideration for China's interests. Beijing sees QUAD as a US strategy to contain China. Yoon is also interested in good relations with China. However, it is becoming apparent that he will take a much more critical stance towards Beijing.

This interview was conducted by Alexander Isele.



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