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The Moon also rises

South Korea's new left-leaning president is keen to build better ties with the North

Following his predecessor's ousting in a corruption scandal, the left-leaning lawyer Moon Jae-in has been elected President of South Korea. His victory in the race to the Blue House could herald a new era of rapprochement with Pyongyang, as Sven Schwersensky explains to <link about writers-and-contributors writer anja-papenfuss-1>Anja Papenfuß.

South Korea has gone to the polls and returned left-leaning liberal Moon Jae-in as president. How was he able to decide the contest in his favour against a field of twelve candidates – and against the two favourites, Ahn Cheol-soo and Hong Jun-pyo?

For many voters, especially younger people, Moon Jae-in embodies an alternative to the politics of the previous government under Park Geun-hye. <link regions asia article show room-at-the-top-1909>Dismissed from office on allegations of corrupt practices, abuse of power, and passing on state secrets, Park is now awaiting trial. The <link regions asia article show body-and-seoul-1797>months of demonstrations which preceded her impeachment were, however, as much an expression of general dissatisfaction with a South Korean society increasingly marked by social injustice and polarisation. As such, Moon's manifesto promise to use state programmes to create 170,000 public sector jobs and another 650,000 in the wider economy has kindled hope among many. What is more, Moon has continually underlined the importance of active political intervention in building a fairer society and has advocated reform of the country's social security systems. With their guarded statements on these questions, his two main opponents did not win over enough voters.

Who is Moon Jae-in? What are his convictions and what is his style of politics?

Moon Jae-in comes from a humble background. Born in 1953 shortly before the end of the Korean War as the son of refugees fleeing the conflict, he went on to study law and was imprisoned for his involvement

in student political opposition to the military regime of Park Chung-hee (Park Geun-Hye's father). He was therefore barred from becoming a judge after graduation, as the profession was not open to those with political convictions; during his subsequent career as a lawyer, these experiences led him to take up human rights cases – and to work with Roo Moo-hyun, who would go on to become president. Elected in 2002, he made Moon his chief-of-staff.

Moon is seen as confident and decisive, but in the current political climate he'll need to be equally willing to talk and negotiate. With his Democratic Party holding only 119 seats, he doesn't have a parliamentary majority; he'll need to find a stable coalition partner in order to govern.

What are the most pressing political issues at home?

His overarching campaign theme was a commitment to repair social cohesion and create a fairer society. To make good on this, he'll have to seize the initiative on economic and social policy; education, though, harbours several large-scale challenges. He'll also have to attempt a broad set of constitutional reforms, as President Park's approach to presidential authority shows just how easily the president's wide ranging powers can be abused. Moon will need to strengthen the role of parliament, and ensure its members, and the public, keep the president accountable. Without the possibility of standing for re-election, which is currently forbidden by the constitution, presidents currently have five years during which they can rule practically as monarchs without any obligation to justify their conduct to voters.

What changes will Moon bring to foreign policy?

Moon Jae-in wants to reset the relationship with North Korea, complementing the current regime of sanctions with serious offers of dialogue. Theoretically, there is nothing stopping him inviting the North to negotiate on the joint industrial park at Kaesong. He also wants to open talks, step by step, on other areas of contention between the North and South, with the overall aim of renewing diplomatic ties on the peninsula. This also means working more closely with the USA to come up with an overarching peace architecture for north-east Asia. That won't be possible without changes to South Korean-Chinese relations. The key factorfor any progress here, however, will be whether he can secure early successes in any overtures to Pyongyang.

What will happen to Park Geun-hye?

The criminal case will proceed through the courts up to the highest

instance and will, at first, be of limited importance to Moon Jae-in's presidency. But things could get more interesting if one of the courts finds there's insufficient proof to convict her.
