

A Mandate with Caveats: Lee Myung Bak's Election, Politics, and Policy

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Assessment of the Election

The election result we witnessed yesterday may not have been very surprising but it was something new—the victor won by a large margin, the conservative party was returned to the Blue House, and voter turnout was down. The alliance with Washington and relations with North Korea were not divisive factors. This was an election completely apart from the ideological battle that was waged in 2002; it was truly a vote for change. Even though this election has passed and the expected result is the actual result, this may only be the beginning of a politically tumultuous period between now and legislative elections in April—several months during which politics will likely trump policy.

Public fatigue with ten years of progressive administrations was clear even before campaigning began in earnest. This long tenure of the left—historic, as it was—in addition to exhaustion over President Roh Moo Hyun's style and his particular brand of politics heavily steeped in ideology, made circumstances ripe for change. As a result, the prevailing “conservative wind” made a strong showing: if we add the two conservative candidates' vote together, we see they captured a significant sixty three percent of the vote.

In many ways, including in style and personal background, President-elect Lee Myung Bak is the exact opposite of Mr. Roh. He has sold himself as the non-ideological “CEO” candidate, the former mayor of Seoul and businessman who knows how to get things done, including generating economic growth. Mr. Lee brought to the table a “conservative pragmatism” that was particularly appealing and refreshing for voters in the wake of the Roh administration.

But pragmatism does not usually speak to the imagination, and neither do corruption scandals. In this election, we certainly did not see the level of enthusiasm that accompanied Kim Dae Jung's groundbreaking election—the first peaceful transfer of power from the ruling party to the opposition. We did not see the passion and nationalism associated with Roh Moo Hyun's election, which represented the passing of the baton to a new generation brandishing anti-establishment credentials. Instead, we find no such enthusiasm, even among Lee's supporters. His success largely rests on anti-Roh sentiments and expectations for his capability to perform, his competence as a manager.

This election has not featured anti-American themes or deep, bitter contention on the North Korea issue. The recent North-South summit did not resonate with the public (who, however they feel, are tired of this issue being politicized), and Mr. Chung Dong Young's attempts to gain traction on inter-Korean issues have not been effective. Indeed, in a December 1st poll from the liberal *Hankyoreh* newspaper, only three percent of voters said they believed North Korea should be a “top issue” in the election.

Rather, economic management and practical, personal concerns, from housing costs to jobs, have come to the fore, trumping the once emotional, impassioned concerns over relations with the North and the U.S. For now, management of relations with these two countries has faded into the background, becoming temporarily dormant. This may have as much to do with the “political moment” as with the current state of play with Pyongyang and Washington: the U.S. and North Korea both appear to be sincerely working toward a denuclearization arrangement, and the Roh administration has worked hard to strengthen the alliance and improve coordination with Washington over the last few years. The lack of emphasis on these issues may also be due to the maturing of the Korean voter, who is not influenced by North Korea’s posture, and who is more interested in pragmatic policies than emotional appeals that play on identity issues. Also, voters are divided less along generational lines. According to a Gallup Korea poll conducted for *Chosun Ilbo*, approximately forty percent of voters across all age groups supported a conservative candidate, while Mr. Chung also showed fairly similar favorability among age groups. Many younger voters were concerned about jobs and supported Mr. Lee, who bet his campaign and won the election on the issue of capable economic management.

In the last two elections, Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun were catapulted to victory through coalitions. But this time, rather than coalitions, we saw fissures in both the conservative and progressive camps. With far-right, center-right, center-left, and far-left candidates, a dozen in all, there were options for voters along the full political spectrum, rather than a strict black-or-white, liberal-or-conservative choice—what has been in years past, a limiting, sometimes superficial dualism. This diversity of choice for voters could continue into the general election and beyond, and we may witness the emergence of a true multi-party system, and a new competition to control the middle. This is a very positive development.

The New Administration: Tasks and Challenges

The new administration will face several tasks and challenges right away. It is technically possible that the special prosecutor’s inquiry could lead to charges against the president-elect. But Mr. Lee’s significant mandate will influence the special investigation—the margin of his victory undermines the power and legitimacy of the special prosecutor, whose appointment is not a strictly legal move, but rather a political one. The special prosecutor will likely be appointed in early January, begin work by mid-January, and then will have thirty days to report, with a possible extension of ten days.

If President-elect Lee survives the investigation unscathed, his inauguration day on February 25th will be a triumph, and he will have very strong momentum going into the April election. The reliance of Lee Hoi Chang and liberal forces on the anti-corruption theme could serve them even less well in April than it did this week, though it is likely to remain their major weapon against the new president. At this juncture, voters seem to have judged a fairly strictly conceived trade-off: capable economic management over totally clean politics.

Over the next few months, the new administration will be faced with the very challenging task of simultaneously handling general election preparations and the development of new policy. It is likely that policy development will temporarily take a back seat to political imperatives, a factor that may eliminate any “honeymoon period” for the new administration. The outcome of the general election will be crucial to how the new administration moves forward. Mr. Lee and Ms. Park Geun Hye are not likely to split before the general election, as they know they can do better together. The new president will be unlikely to make overtures to Lee Hoi Chang, who may attract more conservative voters, plus some GNP defectors, ahead of the April election. But after the general election, there is a real possibility that President Lee will be tempted to start his own party. A major question after the election will be: How will the president and Ms. Park reestablish their relationship? It will all depend on the outcome of the general election.

On the progressive side, it may be difficult if not impossible to hold the ruling party together. After the presidential election result, Mr. Chung will have to step back, and there will be a power struggle over the leadership position that may very well lead to a break. Though progressive parties will be weakened, progressive NGOs could very well be galvanized in their challenges to key policies of a conservative administration. Progressive forces out of power will continue to have their voices heard in this way.

To craft and implement his pragmatic policies, the new president is likely to appoint professionals and bureaucrats—academics who represent a new generation in the GNP, former foreign ministry officials, and even businessmen, many of whom are not known to American policymakers. The new administration will be faced with the incredibly daunting challenge of implementing campaign promises, from the ambitious “747 Plan” to the cross-Korea canal. Ability to implement policies will rest largely on maintaining strong support in the National Assembly, and performance could determine whether corruption scandals will be forgotten or not.

Key Policy Issues

North Korean policy

In terms of North Korea policy, the new team will undertake what they see as a crucial, comprehensive policy review. This will include close consultations with the U.S., and during the review, aid will not be suspended, assuming the six-party process stays on track. It seems quite likely that North Korea will seek to test President Lee fairly soon into his tenure, and there are many ways the North could choose to do this, ranging from demands for more aid to suspension of inter-Korean initiatives. At this point, we only know Mr. Lee’s position on North Korea in general terms, but the tone set by his views is very important, and noticeably closer to the U.S. position. First, he will stress denuclearization and will employ more conditionality in inter-Korean relations. Second, under a Lee administration, the North may stand to gain an unprecedented economic package—a kind of Marshall Plan for North Korea. There will be more sticks and potentially bigger carrots on the table.

Barring any dramatic change in North Korean behavior or policy, it is quite likely that inter-Korean relations will see a cool-down in the early months and years of the new administration, certainly through the comprehensive policy review, and as the North becomes accustomed to new conditionality. If that happens, then it could conflict with the interests of the Bush administration, which is driving hard to get something done by 2008. This mismatch of U.S.-ROK timelines and preferences—ironically, the exact opposite of what we saw in 2001—could create tension between the U.S. and the ROK and also resurrect contention over the issue within the ROK. In this context, it seems quite legitimate to wonder whether the six-party process can continue apace, given the high politics that will prevail in Seoul until April and the coming American political season.

We will have to see what happens with the North Korea policy review, but it seems likely that this new administration will not put the same emphasis on a ‘peace regime’ that we have seen from the Roh administration. For the president-elect and his advisors, denuclearization is the first step. Though they do not disagree with the aims of a peace regime, they see it as a longer-term prospect—in much the same way the U.S. views the peace regime concept.

The conservative administration will find that there is no alternative to engagement with the North, but key questions will remain: Engagement on what terms, and what to do if the North refuses to meet those terms? The fundamentals of DPRK policy will not be very different. Yet, there will certainly be some cosmetic changes, given the pressure to differentiate from the previous administration—a dynamic with which Washington is quite familiar.

The U.S.-ROK Alliance

There are expectations on both sides of the alliance that Mr. Lee's election represents an opportunity to improve U.S.-ROK relations. This seems especially true in light of the last five years featuring the overlap of President Roh and the 386ers with President Bush and the neoconservatives, which was, at least in early years, possibly the least workable combination of leadership for the alliance. But new hope is justified and both sides have reason to be optimistic. The Lee administration will stress the importance of the U.S.-ROK alliance and will also attempt to restore trilateral collaboration among South Korea, the U.S., and Japan. President-elect Lee is much less likely to play the nationalism card when it comes to relations with Japan.

Though the expectation for an improvement in the tone of relations is likely to be realized, the hard work of realignment and orienting the alliance for the future will remain hard work. The president-elect and his advisors are intent on revisiting some policy issues, including the timing of the transfer of wartime operational control. The OPCON issue has the potential to be somewhat problematic, depending on how the two sides handle it. The ROK will be seeking a more solid implementation plan with a longer time horizon. U.S. policymakers seem reluctant to revisit this issue, but an unwillingness to listen and to take these arguments seriously could reverse a more optimistic mood. On the Korean side, at the level of implementation, there will be a certain amount of trial and error as officials new to government gain their footing.

While stressing the alliance, we cannot expect the new administration's policy to go back to the 1980s. Things have changed—the nature of North-South relations has changed, along with South Korean threat perceptions, and so the alliance must also evolve. The U.S. and Korea should explore a regional role for the alliance and think seriously about a rationale that includes North Korea but is not *solely* based on North Korea. Greater focus on regional security and stability would likely involve measures over which the Roh government was very reluctant: possible participation in the Proliferation Security Initiative and more cooperation with Japan. The new administration must reassess what South Korea's interests vis-à-vis these initiatives are, and what role a confident, mature South Korea can and should play in the region.

If the new administration is seen as too pro-American, progressive NGOs' policy challenges might take on anti-American tones. President-elect Lee will be faced with the challenge of managing this perception while executing on policy imperatives. Unlike past liberal governments, the new conservative government will not be able to co-opt the progressive NGO sector, which might pose a new challenge for the U.S.

Even though the presidential election is now behind us, politics will continue to play in a big way for the next few months. Special investigations, policy reviews and political fissures mean that at this point, there may be more questions than answers on the Korean political scene, and of course, there is always room for surprises. A near-fifty percent mandate means less uncertainty, but uncertainty nonetheless.