
South Korea's Election: What to Expect from Presid

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On 19 December 2007, South Koreans elected Lee Myung-bak as their president. Barring sensational developments in a scandal investigation that still dogs him, Lee, the candidate of the conservative Grand National Party (GNP or "Hannaradang") will be inaugurated on 25 February 2008 to replace Roh Moo-hyun, who is limited by the constitution to a single five-year term. A former top executive of the Hyundai conglomerate, he has pledged to be an "economic president who will revive the economy with his practical business experience". Although he has ideological differences with his liberal predecessor, he is unlikely to make dramatic changes in foreign or security policy.

Lee won 48.7 per cent of the vote, while Chung Dong-young, the candidate of the United New Democratic Party (UNDP) captured 26.2 per cent. Lee Hoi-ch'ang, the unsuccessful GNP candidate in 1997 and 2002 who stood as an independent this time, finished third with 15.1 per cent. Voter turnout was only 62.9 per cent, well off the 70.1 per cent in 2002 and a record low for a presidential election. Regional differences, a major factor in past elections, were clearly evident again.

Lee is believed likely to make greater efforts in the relationship with the U.S., which has been strained throughout the Bush administration, and to seek better ties with both Japan and China. However, he will be under the same constraints as his predecessors in all these relationships, which tend to be buffeted by events outside the control of the South Korean government. Progress is unlikely in the highly emotional territorial dispute with Japan. Lee has said he wants to see more South Korean investment in China and closer consultation on security issues, but any move toward Beijing is unlikely to be at the expense of the key relationship with Washington.

Lee is expected to continue South Korea's efforts at rapprochement with North Korea but to press more firmly for reciprocity than his predecessor. He has outlined a plan to narrow the economic gap by providing the North investment and help in creating an export manufacturing economy. There is widespread consensus in South Korea on engagement with the North, so the only change anticipated under Lee is a greater emphasis on holding Pyongyang to its commitments.

The executive has strong powers in foreign policy, national security policy and inter-Korean relations. However, since democratisation in 1987, the National Assembly has become more powerful and assertive, and many presidential actions require its support. National Assembly elections will be held in April 2008, and the results could have a serious impact on President-elect Lee's policy agenda. Currently, the GNP has 128 seats out of 299, thirteen fewer than the UNDP.

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