

**South Korea Political Test in Year of the Dragon**  
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**By Lee Byong-chul**

*Things look bleak for the Grand National Party*

The next three months in South Korea, are expected to be the fiercest of the coming lunar year, ahead of April general elections as advocates of the anti-Korea-US Free Trade Agreement have newly taken over the leadership of the opposition Democratic United Party.

Upon being elected the new DUP chairperson, Han Myeong-sook, who was the nation's first woman prime minister under the Roh Moo-hyun government, quickly announced that the party would make every effort to nullify the pact if it wins the general elections. The Roh government emphasized a balanced relationship between South Korea and the US. Han and her followers are not nearly as pro-American.

The two governments have always existed in uneasy cooperation with each other, with the Status of Forces Agreement covering the conduct of American soldiers in South Korea a regular flashpoint, along with the importation of US beef. The free trade agreement, four years in the making, was finally pushed through late last year over the objection of a variety of entrenched interests and demonstrations in Seoul by thousands of protesters.

President Lee Myung-bak, himself facing declining popularity over a series of scandals, concerns about the trade deal, deteriorating relations with North Korea and a widening wealth gap, is regarded as having made his ruling Grand National Party vulnerable at the polls.

Given the public's soaring dissatisfaction and impatience with the GNP and the government alike, almost none of the prospective candidates will be to Lee's right on most issues. The right knows intuitively that another conservative government would be a tough sell. Lee's key policies have thus started to resemble the 13th floor of the average hotel, which appears not to exist. To this end, it is no wonder that a number of staunch proponents of the free trade agreement are being regarded as persona non grata in secular left-leaning political circles.

In the meantime, the South Korean electorate is getting younger. This demographic change suggests that voters could, in theory at least, be more 'progressive.' The selection of Park Won-soon last year as the new mayor of the country's capital of Seoul illustrated the voters' strength and their ability to change existing practices by electoral participation, far better for the country's longer-term political development. A gradual move toward political maturity, change and economic transparency appears evident. It wasn't just the GNP that took a bath in Seoul. The Democratic Union Party wasn't even able to field a strong contender.

Given these concerns, the Grand National Party's projected path to victory in the April general elections is narrow indeed, much more so than the GNP supporters expect despite the popularity of Park Geun-hye, now the head of the party. The daughter of the late Park Chung-hee, the president of South Korea from 1963 to 1979, when he was assassinated by his chief of security, she has heretofore been considered South Korea's most prominent politician.

That may no longer be true. Recent polls show that a majority of voters distrust the incumbent government and the ruling party. To this end, President Lee unusually expressed

his regret over a series of corruption scandals in his New Year address. It has not been enough to allay public distrust with the GNP. Young people's widespread anger and deep antipathy toward the Lee government appears to be a key driving force putting the GNP's fate on the edge.

The sinking fortunes of the GNP were exacerbated after a staffer to a GNP representative allegedly masterminded a cyber-attack on the National Election Commission's web site, apparently in an effort to prevent young voters from getting to the polls. The representative reportedly served as the campaign communications director for the GNP's mayoral nominee in the Seoul election, although it's not yet clear whether the lawmaker actually orchestrated the DDoS attack that paralyzed the election watchdog's web site more than two hours.

While the lawmaker eventually resigned from the GNP to take responsibility for the hacking scandal, the incident has shocked the electorate and humiliated the party. While some politicians say the GNP could collapse earlier than the new and unpredictable Kim Jong-un regime in North Korea, Park Geun-hye, the odds-on favorite for the 2012 presidential elections, has already made clear that she will not abandon the party.

In the eyes of Park, an iconic woman in South Korean political affairs, brushing off the right-wing party because of its deepening unpopularity is against her prescient political faith, which she says is based on principle and trust. That's why Park remained the preferred candidate in various opinion polls, at least before Ahn Cheol-soo, a reformist professor at the prestigious Seoul National University, rocked the secular political circles after his colleague, political novice Park Won-soon, won his unexpected victory in the Seoul mayoral race last year.

Since that time, public support for what was thought to be a potential shoo-in to be the GNP's presidential nominee in 2012 has flagged remarkable, with Park clearly losing the momentum to Ahn. Park's prospects for the presidency are starting to look bleaker as Ahn's political tailwinds grow bigger. Ahn has become a lightning rod for both the anti-Park and anti-Lee government forces.

There is no question that Ahn could be considerably more than a small footnote to Korean politics, given that the Internet is particularly God's gift to the South Korean left. South Korea remains one of the most Internet-savvy countries on the planet and is increasingly where the left gets its news, unfiltered by the mainstream press.

In addition, more than 20 million South Koreans can access Twitter or Facebook on their cellphones. Politically astute voters appear unlikely to forgive any political party, presidential candidates themselves included. In 2012, a major change in the political landscape is likely.

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