



Opposition landslide in mayoral elections shifts political landscape

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Mayoral candidates from the conservative opposition People Power Party, Oh Se-hoon in Seoul and Park Hyung-joon in Busan, swept to victory on 7 April in a major upset for the ruling Democratic Party and its President, Moon Jae-in. The results show how Moon's popularity has waned since he secured a 180-seat majority in the National Assembly elections last April. Moon's reform agenda – to reduce the power of prosecutors and cool the property market – has encountered fierce opposition and, in the case of the property measures, backfired.

The People Power Party's twin victories highlight the level of public fatigue at the extreme confrontation between the Prosecutor's Office and the Minister of Justice, as well as disillusionment with ballooning house prices and rents, despite reforms that were supposed to provide relief to first-time buyers and tenants. Public anger against Moon's Democratic Party was also exacerbated by land speculation by employees of the Korea Land & Housing Corporation, a public institution, based on their access to insider information about the development of a new town, an issue that was uncovered just before the election. Efforts to improve inter-Korean relations, a key focus of the Moon administration, have also fallen into stalemate, further contributing to falls in the ruling party's popularity.

While the People's Power Party fought fiercely against Moon's reforms, it has been criticised for failing to provide realistic policy alternatives. The party is also tainted by historic ties, not only to big business and the military, but also to the impeachment of former President Park Geun-hye by the Constitutional Court in 2017 – a first in Korean history. Park and her predecessor, Lee Myung-bak, are both serving lengthy prison sentences on corruption charges.

Although the two newly elected mayors were both close aides of Lee Myung-bak, the opposition benefited from Moon's recent travails. When Moon came into office in 2017 levels of trust in the conservatives were at historic lows, but the latest elections results show strong dissatisfaction with the ruling party from voters in Korea's two largest metropolitan areas.

Both of the new mayors have had long careers in politics and administration. Both are former members of the National Assembly. Oh Se-hoon has also been Mayor of Seoul before, while Park Hyung-joon is a former Presidential Secretary for Political Affairs at the President's executive office, the Blue House. Mayors Oh and Park will only serve for about one year, however, as the by-elections resulted from the death and resignation, respectively, of their predecessors. It will likely be therefore for either of them to introduce any significant changes. Nevertheless, their landslide victories signal a shift in the overall political landscape in the run-up to all-important presidential elections in March 2022.

These results can be seen as evidence that, following the end of the military regime, the Korean public is not willing to offer unconditional support to any political party, particularly if they make critical mistakes.

While Lee Jae-myung, the Democratic Party mayor of Gyeonggi Province, is the ruling party's preferred presidential candidate, the opposition currently does not yet have a strong candidate. Following Wednesday's election, it is increasingly likely that Yoon Seok-yeol, a former prosecutor general, will cooperate with the opposition party as a potential presidential candidate. Yoon stood down in protest at the Moon Administration's prosecutorial reforms following a legal scandal involving former Democratic Party Minister of Justice Cho Kuk.

Under the previous conservative administration, issues such as violent responses to protests and the illegitimate surveillance of political opponents pushed many voters towards the Democratic Party. Mayors Oh and Park have distanced themselves from these problems and are actively positioning themselves as moderate conservatives. They are seen as having the potential to play a greater role as political centrists in the future, and as a result, it is anticipated that they could play a major role in bringing about a change of government next year if they lead Korea's two biggest metropolitan centres well. They are likely to pursue administrative reform based on their doctrine of "rational conservatism". Whether they are successful in this will be central to efforts to increase centrist votes for the opposition party in next year's presidential election.

It is expected that Oh will seek re-election in the regular mayoral election next year and will run for the presidency in 2027. If that comes to pass, it will be a big "come back" after a ten-year political gap. Although some think Oh might run in the 2022 presidential election, many see his candidacy as better placed for 2027. He would certainly risk criticism if he were to start campaigning for the presidency in autumn this year, as his win in Seoul would be seen by some as opportunistic – just a springboard for the presidential election.

New Busan Mayor, Park Hyung-joon, has also reappeared after a long gap in his political career but is not seen as a presidential candidate. His aim will be to continue his political career as mayor of Busan.

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