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# Korea Focus

## One election, two winners

South Korea's parliamentary elections marked by  
success in the fight against the corona pandemic

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# One election, two winners

South Korea's parliamentary elections marked by  
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The parliamentary elections in South Korea on 15 April were the first nationwide democratic elections since the outbreak of the corona pandemic. The fact that these elections could be and were held at all is directly related to the strategy that the South Korean government is pursuing to contain the pandemic. The clear winner was the incumbent President Moon Jae-in, who was rewarded in particular for his successful crisis management. But the election is also a victory for the still comparatively young democracy in South Korea. Since the government and the population have learned from the experience of previous epidemics, citizens have not had to choose between exercising their democratic rights and protecting their health.

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## The outcomes of the parliamentary elections

In the parliamentary elections of 15 April, more than 29 million people (66 percent of the electorate) cast their votes to elect the 300 members of the National Assembly based in Seoul. This was the highest turnout in a parliamentary election in South Korea in almost three decades. It was also the first time that the reformed electoral system was applied. In the reform, the distribution of 47 seats that had previously been allocated proportionally was reorganized and the voting age was reduced from 19 years to 18 years of age. The Democratic Party (Töburöminju-dang) and its satellite (Töburösimindang) won a clear victory of 180 seats in parliament. This guarantees the governing liberal alliance an absolute majority in parliament and a super-majority of three-fifths of MPs, which allows the ruling bloc to speed up legislative procedures. The conservative alliance between the United Future Party (Miraet'onghap-tang) and its sister party (Mirae-han'guktang) won only 103 seats - the worst results for the conservatives in any parliamentary election since 1960. The Democratic Party, which previously had a parliamentary but no absolute majority now leads a coalition with a three-fifths majority and can pass laws without having to rely on opposition votes. If President Moon Jae-in succeeds in keeping potential successors, such as Lee Nak-yeon in particular, in check, the election victory will give him unprecedented leeway for his remaining two years in office. He can use this leeway to achieve the political goals he has set himself. It is to be expected that the Moon administration will primarily turn its attention to domestic political issues. These include greater control over the corporate conglomerates (chaebol) that dominate the South Korean economy, but also the reduction of income disparities, an increase in social spending, and additional employment regulations.

The extent to which the parliamentary elections were seen as a vote on the strategy that Moon had chosen to contain the corona pandemic is shown not least by the fact that approval rates for him and his party had only been around 30 percent a few weeks earlier. This was caused, among others, by sluggish economic growth, the failed attempt to push through a highly unpopular structural reform, the diplomatic stalemate in relations with North Korea, and a political scandal involving Moon's own Minister of Justice. The sharp rise in the number of coronavirus cases at the end of February particularly intensified criticism from the conservative camp and caused the Moon government's poll ratings to plummet. Moon's reaction to the outbreak of the corona pandemic led to a rise in approval ratings from 41% at the end of January to 57% at the beginning of April 2020. Both the measures directly implemented in South Korea and Moon's international "corona diplomacy" contributed to an increased public support for the President and his party.

## Moon's successful corona response strategy

The support for the Moon administration and the resulting electoral behavior of South Korean citizens can be better understood by taking a closer look at South Korea's response strategy to contain the spread of the corona virus. This strategy essentially consists of three components: testing, tracing, and treating. Seoul's COVID-19 policy reflects the central, and in part painful, lessons that South Korea has learned in dealing with the previous SARS and MERS epidemics. South Korea reformed its infrastructure to combat possible epidemics, established an emergency center for infectious diseases and set up a multi-level system that is clearly proving successful in the current crisis. Comprehensive and transparent communication and information of the population is the top priority. The public face of this strategy is Jung Eun-kyeong, the head of the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC). In daily press briefings, she reports in detail on developments in Korea and explains why the implemented measures are deemed necessary.

At the heart of South Korea's response strategy is the maxim that comprehensive tests are necessary. Immediately after Chinese scientists published the genetic sequence of the COVID-19 virus on January 12, 2020, at least four South Korean companies started to develop and store test kits. As the situation worsened, the country was able to test more than 10,000 people per day, partly doing so in specially designed "drive-through" stations to ensure safe and rapid testing. According to data from Oxford University, South Korea had already conducted 188,518 tests on March 8, 2020, while the number was 124,716 in Germany, 49,937 in Italy and only 3,069 in the U.S.

A second central component of South Korea's strategy to contain the corona pandemic is what is called "comprehensive contact tracing," i.e. the tracing of contacts of infected persons and the evaluation of movement protocols. Lockdowns, which are associated with a general restriction of freedom of movement, have not been implemented. In the event of a positive test, the infected persons have to enter into quarantine and compliance with the quarantine regulations is strictly controlled. Those affected are questioned by staff of the health authorities and must be transparent about their previous movements and the contacts they have had since the time of suspected transmission. For this purpose, telephone and, if necessary, credit card data as well as recordings from surveillance cameras are used to trace movements and track down contacts. This data is then publicly disclosed without mentioning the name of the person concerned. In this way, everyone can assess for themselves whether they are potentially at risk or not. All those who are known to have been in the vicinity of the infected person are notified by telephone. On a smartphone app, GPS maps make it possible to track the spread of the infection. The legal basis for these measures is the Law on the Control and Prevention of Infectious Diseases, which was passed after the MERS outbreak in 2015 and which requires the government to make certain information public, e.g. the movement profiles of those infected, the public transportation they used, and the medical facilities where they were treated.

## Support from the population

As important as the above-mentioned government measures are for the successful crisis management in South Korea, they would not be effective without the support of the public. While South Korea does have a strong sense of the common good, public support for the government's certainly far-reaching measures cannot be explained by fealty to Confucianism or to a collective ideology, as is frequently maintained in Western media. Rather, what is decisive is the insight, based in particular on experience with the management of the MERS epidemic, that the spread of an epidemic cannot be prevented without transparency and collective action. Far-reaching controls are also considered essential and trump data protection and privacy concerns. The corresponding measures must, however, be consistent and transparently communicated if they are to be publicly supported. The perception that the government was sufficiently transparent was rewarded with a steadily growing confidence in its strategy. In other words, the measures mentioned above are not being implemented against the will of the population, but are largely supported by it. Encroachments on one's privacy are considered necessary both for one's own safety and in order to avoid more extensive measures. Neither at the national nor at the regional level have measures been taken that are comparable to those in Europe, such as general contact restrictions, domestic travel restrictions or nationwide lockdowns - not even in the city of Daegu, located in the southwest of the country, which was regarded as the epicentre of the corona outbreak in South Korea. In South Korea, social distancing and the already widespread wearing of protective masks are seen as part of a collective health campaign rather than as the result of a state-imposed directive. Many South Koreans already practiced social distancing even before the government coordinated corresponding nationwide measures. In Daegu, for example, many restaurants, shops, and cinemas closed down, not because the government had intervened directly, but because of self-imposed social distancing practiced by Daegu citizens.

## Lessons from the “South Korean model”

The way South Korea deals with the corona pandemic is not easily transferable to other countries or regions. The factors that determine the South Korean success are too specific. For example, the current actions of both the government and the population are guided by the collective experiences that South Korea has had with the earlier SARS and MERS epidemics. Europe does not have this collective learning experience. It will therefore be essential for European countries as well as the EU to now learn the right lessons and draw the right conclusions for eventual future pandemics. To that end, a fundamental debate is needed on how to strike a balance between ensuring basic democratic rights and the need to restrict these rights in the event of a threat to public health. In contrast to the Europeans, the South Koreans have collectively decided to accept encroachments on their privacy as necessary for their own and society's safety. The nature of the collective decision to be taken in Germany and other European countries is a central and still open question.



