South Korea’s National Assembly Elections
Ki-Young Sung, Postdoctoral Fellow, USC Korean Studies Institute

The ruling Saenuri (New Frontier) Party, renamed from the old Grand National Party (Hannaradang) retained a majority by winning 152 out of 300 seats. How do you interpret the victory?

The Saenuri party’s victory came as a surprise because until only a few months ago, the conventional wisdom and opinion polls had both expected that the ruling Saenuri Party would not be able to win even 100 seats. In the last few days of the campaign, political analysts had only expected that at best the Saenuri Party would win between 130-140 seats. The main reason expectations for the ruling party were low had been the unpopularity of President Lee Myung-bak, driven by his top-down leadership style and a widening gap between the rich and the poor. A recent scandal about illegal surveillance against civilians in which a group of presidential office secretaries were involved further fuelled public anger at the ruling elites’ power abuse. But the final result was at odds with these expectations. Put bluntly, the opposition Democratic United Party (DUP) chipped away at its own lead by fumbling the process of nomination of its candidates. By and large, they recalled the Roh Moo Hyun royalists and other candidates who had lost in the last election four years ago. The opposition paid less attention to attempting to recruit fresh figures outside politics. In contrast, the Saenuri Party, as shown in the recent renaming of the Party, made every effort to reform its stale, old-fashioned and ‘rich men’s party’ image and to introduce new faces into politics.

What are the ramifications of this election for South Korea’s domestic and foreign policies?

Actual issues between the parties, such as jobs, welfare budget, and North Korea policy, did not attract much attention during the election campaign. Both parties instead showed a certain level of convergence by promising to increase governmental budget for childcare, health insurance, and public education, resulting in a blurring of the policy debates between the parties. Thus, the election result is unlikely to have immediate effects on major domestic and foreign policies of South Korea. In the same vein, the US-ROK free trade agreement will probably not face any substantial changes as a result of the loss of the DUP that pledged a full-scale renegotiation. Saenuri’s Park Geun-hye is expected to distance her party from the unpopular Lee Myung-bak administration from now until the presidential election in December, where Park is widely considered a frontrunner. What is more important is the fact that the Saenuri-dominated parliament is likely to endure until the first half of the next president term, who will be elected in December. This means that even if the DUP wins the presidential election, (an unlikely prospect at this time), his (or her) power might be restrained by the parliament. This is a significant blow to the opposition party.

South Korea is well known for its widely available mobile networks and technology. Did technology affect the younger voters in any way?
Recent South Korean elections have revealed a highly polarized pattern between generations, with the high turnout of the young generation tended to be automatically interpreted as a signal to support progressive voice. So the supporters for the DUP and many young electorates and TV stars, with massive scale of tweeting and other mobile networks, joined together to encourage youngsters to go to the polling station. Voter turnout was 54.3 percent, 8.2 percentage points higher than four years ago, although that in itself did not help the opposition party enough. However, the effect of massive mobilization through tweets and other media, estimated to reach almost 10% of the total population, will become one of the most interesting points to observe in future Korean politics.

Can we read any indications on how this election results might affect the presidential election upcoming in December?

The biggest beneficiary will be Park Geun-hye, the leader of the ruling Saenuri Party and unrivalled frontrunner for the next president within the Party. The ruling party had been in shambles until Park reluctantly took over the top job in December last year due in large part to a series of political scandals. With this election victory, Park not only revitalized her party but also paved the way to consolidate her leadership. What is more, she once again validated her competitiveness by raking up ballots in a very short period of time -- especially in the midst of her party’s crisis. She already demonstrated her capability in similar settings in the past general elections and by-elections when she was asked to lead the campaign and obtained a nickname, ‘a queen of election victory’ as a result. However, her relatively low approval rate among young and highly educated voter in the capital region of Seoul and Kyonggi, which accounts for nearly half of the total electorate, still constitutes the biggest obstacle she will face in her journey to become president.

Is there any unrivalled opposition candidate in the opposition alliance vis-à-vis Park Geun-hye?
The DUP’s Moon Jae-In, the former chief of staff to the late President Roh Moo-Hyun, grew as a centripetal presidential candidate for the December election. His victory in the stronghold of the Saenuri Party put him on a direct path to declare his candidacy for president. But his overall support rate still remains just over the half of Park Geun-hye. An even more interesting possibility is whether Ahn Cheol-soo, a Seoul National University professor and successful entrepreneur in the IT industry, will run for president. His clean and innocent image has resonated with Korean young voters’ aspirations for a noble, innovative, and mentor-style leader who has been keeping his distance from the unproductive and collusive Korean party politics. Ahn’s popularity signifies either a formation of the third party or an alliance with the DUP.

What is your prediction for the DUP’s strategy to prepare for the presidential election only 8 months away?

It is not difficult to predict that the DUP leadership will attempt to form an alliance with Ahn Cheol-soo. The simple mathematical calculation shows that if they combine Moon and Ahn’s support it would exceed that for Park. Another scenario for Ahn would be to begin running for the presidency as an independent candidate, which would also keep open the possibility for the last-minute alliance with Moon to unify anti-Park voices. Ahn already proved his political influence and popularity by pursuing this path at the last Seoul Mayor by-election back in October 2011. Back then, he successfully installed a much lower-supported NGO activist in office when he suspended his bid declaring his willingness to endorse him. However, Korean politics is notoriously volatile, and it is difficult to predict today how an election might turn out eight months from now.

Ki-Young Sung is a post-doctoral research fellow at the USC Korean Studies Institute.