

By-election increases pressure on President Park by Karl Friedhoff

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With the by-elections in South Korea done and dusted, the ruling Saenuri Party has emerged stronger after capturing 11 of 15 contested National Assembly seats. The conventional narrative labels this a major victory for Saenuri and President Park Geun-hye, allowing her to move forward with stronger backing in the legislature. Technically this is true. In reality it changes little. The by-election result was not a vote of confidence in the Saenuri Party and the president. It was a vote against a shambolic, discredited opposition with a history of recent failures. Rather than offering reprieve for a president under siege following the sinking of the *Sewol* and repeated bungling of ministerial nominations, the results will increase the pressure on the president and her administration.

Throughout her term, President Park has enjoyed a clear mandate from the public. She was the first Korean president to win election by majority and maintained a mid-60s approval rate through the first 14 months of her term. Yet those months yielded little, and her administration was plagued by unforced errors. A recalcitrant opposition – led by the New Politics Alliance for Democracy (NPAD) – certainly makes for a convenient fall guy. But at no point in Park's presidency did she face anything akin to a serious opposition.

In April 2012 the NPAD – then known as the Democratic United Party (DUP) – lost a winnable National Assembly election due to poor campaign strategy. While the opposition's early attempt to make the election a referendum on the unpopular Lee Myung-bak administration had some early success, strategy then turned to make renegotiating portions of the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) central to the campaign. Had the party leadership looked at reliable polling data, it would have seen that the public did not want this rehashed. The public was looking for leadership on issues of the future.

The DUP subsequently lost the December 2012 presidential election, but was then handed a golden political opportunity with reports of meddling in the presidential election by the National Intelligence Service. But the party reverted to old habits – hunger strikes, demonstrations, and demanding the resignation of the president. Neither the president's approval ratings nor support for the Saenuri Party wavered, and the opposition party was further discredited.

Headed into last week's by-election, support for the NPAD hovered around 20 percent nationally – making an

election victory unlikely. This came at a time when the Park administration was enduring its worst two-month stretch following the sinking of the *Sewol*. But an inept, divided opposition party was unable to muster leadership and gain public backing.

This all serves to illustrate a key point – at no point has the Park presidency been hampered by a strong opposition. The opposition has done its share of buffeting in the National Assembly, but at no time was the public supportive on any issue. All the while the president's party controlled the highly unpopular National Assembly. The situation will be the same going forward.

The Park administration complains that the opposition party has prevented qualified ministerial nominations from assuming their post. This is wrong on two counts. First, confirmation by the National Assembly is a courtesy, not a requirement. Even if these ministerial posts do not pass confirmation in the National Assembly, the president can still appoint them. Second, the administration has offered nominations that conflict with its own established narratives. The nomination of Ahn Dae-hee for prime minister offers one example of such a nomination.

Following the sinking of the *Sewol* the administration placed much of the blame on former government officials taking high-paying jobs in industries they were once charged with regulating. There was a promise to crack down on this practice. The administration then nominated Ahn, who after leaving his job as the chief justice of the Supreme Court opened a private law practice where he earned \$1.5 million in six months. While there was little suggestion of wrongdoing, he closely fit the profile of the kind of opportunist the Blue House had pledged to eliminate.

North Korea's belligerence at the beginning of Park's term also cannot be blamed for derailing the administration. North Korea helped to create one of the best moments in her presidency when she called the North's bluff and allowed the Kaesong Industrial Complex to be shut down. The success was short-lived, but it did garner broad public support.

The political capital created by high approval rates in the first 14 months of her five-year term were left largely unspent. Yes, there were big ideas: the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative and the DMZ Peace Park, to name two. But in speaking with and listening to government officials responsible, it is clear there are problems in implementation. This is not a problem of gathering necessary materials and then following a blueprint. There is no blueprint. If implementation does not start soon, these attractively named initiatives – who can object to a peace park? – will be swept out by the next administration.

The president's political capital is now in decline. Several polls put approval and disapproval rates at almost even, just as the diminishing returns on political capital of summits and foreign policy becomes clear.

The ongoing troubles of the Park administration have been self-inflicted. It is time to deal with Korea's domestic challenges, and the sole focus will be on President Park and her administration. But the government remains its own worst enemy, and the first 17 months have not inspired confidence. If the government is unable to show concrete successes on core domestic issues, it will have no one to blame but itself. The notion of an opposition capable of blocking the government was always just a myth. But that myth is now fully and completely dispelled.

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