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After the Election: A Minority President and a Governmental Strategy for Coalition Politics



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In Korea, the presidential policy agenda comes to light when a bill is presented in the National Assembly, agreed to by more than half of the members, and takes the form of law. Under the framework of the 1987 constitution, which is based on the principle of ‘shared authority among separate organizations’, the president, therefore, requires a political strategy that remains cognizant of the fact that he or she always depends upon the approval of the National Assembly to make policies a reality. In addition, the National Assembly law was amended in 2012 so that the Speaker may not introduce a bill without cooperation between the ruling and opposition parties, and a bill may not be referred to a committee without the agreement of three-fifths or 180 members. The regulations of the National Assembly Advancement Act, which grant control of the legislative agenda to a dominant minority party or a coalition of parties that secure 120 seats or two-fifths of the assembly, evoke an awareness in the president of the necessity to ensure the support of a ‘supermajority’ rather than a simple majority for legislation in order to make his or her policy agenda a reality.

The greatest limitation that the 19th President of South Korea, Moon Jae-in, appears to face is the separation and sharing of powers between the administrative branch and the administrative branch specified in the Constitution and the legislative veto power of the minority faction guaranteed by the National Assembly Act. While the ruling Minjoo Party had 120 National Assembly seats on the day Moon Jae-in was inaugurated, the remaining seats are distributed among the opposing parties, with 107 seats for the Liberty Party Korea, 40 seats for the People’s Party, 20 seats for the Bareun Party, 6 seats for the Justice Party, 1 seat for the Saenuri Party, and 6 independents. The ruling party cannot achieve the simple majority required by the Constitution, much less the three-fifths supermajority demanded by the National Assembly Act. It is clear that the ruling party is incapable of unilaterally making the president’s policy agenda into law via the legislative process. With President Moon Jae-in facing the reality of legislative gridlock, alliance politics have risen as the central focus of the government’s strategy following the election.

Mathematically speaking, President Moon Jae-in’s preferred alliance builds a minimum three-fifths winning coalition by tying together the Minjoo Party with the People’s Party and the Bareun Party. While the Justice Party could also become a target for forming a political alliance, if either the People’s Party or the Bareun Party decides to defect from the coalition, the three-fifths winning coalition collapses, essentially giving the two of them decision-making power within the alliance. Although a Minjoo-People’s-Bareun Party triad does form a winning coalition, it also places President Moon Jae-in in a difficult strategic dilemma in terms of how to form such a political alliance. The problem is that the policy preferences of his key supporters are at odds with the policy preferences of the alliance targets.

According to exit polls conducted by three broadcasters, major reasons given by voters for supporting each candidate included ‘ending corruption and bribery’ (20.7%), ‘economic growth’ (19.6%), ‘moral integrity’ (19.3%), and ‘national integration’ (18.1%). While 29.9% of Moon Jae-in voters listed ‘ending corruption and bribery’ as their reason for choosing him, 23.9% indicated ‘national integration’ as their biggest issue. On the other hand, 30.9% of Ahn Cheol-soo’s voters listed ‘moral integrity’ as their reason for choosing him, while 27.3%

indicated they voted on the issue of ‘economic growth’. The total number of people who voted on the issue of ‘ending corruption and bribery’ exceeded the number of Moon Jae-in’s supporters (12.6%) who did so by 9%, while Ahn Cheol-soo’s supporters concentrated on that issue quite fiercely with fully 17% listing it as their main issue in the election. Similarly, the number of total voters who voted on the issue of ‘economic growth’ exceeded the number of Moon Jae-in’s supporters who did so (14.5%) by 5%, and Ahn Cheol-soo’s supporters exceed Moon Jae-in’s on that issue by 12%. In other words, if President Moon places eradicating bribery and corruption at the top of his policy agenda, he can expect a backlash from Ahn’s supporters, and if he places economic growth at the top of his agenda he can expect a backlash from his own supporters.

The best way for a minority president to escape the strategic dilemma of this political alliance issue is to find the lowest common denominator policy-wise among the allied parties and attempt to introduce legislation. To once again quote the exit polls conducted by the three broadcasting stations, 53.2% of voters listed ‘stimulating the economy/job creation’ as their top priority among the issues that the government needs to address. Even more importantly, 51.9% of Moon Jae-in’s supporters, 59% of Ahn Cheol-soo’s supporters, and 50.4% of Hong Jun-pyo’s supporters all agree that the top priority of the president’s policy agenda should be ‘stimulating the economy/job creation’. The same survey found that 53.7% selected ‘National Assembly, political parties’ as the first target for social reform. This policy issue also seems to achieve a broad consensus among Moon’s supporters (45.5%), Ahn’s supporters (61%), and Hong’s supporters (45.8%). It would appear that the agendas of supporting stakeholders converge on these policy points—offering a clear answer to the question as to which direction Moon Jae-in and his coalition should steer the country toward first once they take the reins of the administration.

Following the impeachment of the former president, the inauguration of President Moon Jae-in has given the people great hope for the results of this unprecedented presidential by-election. President Moon is staring this situation directly in the face. However, the discrepancy between expectations and reality is vast. If a minority president is to realize their policy agenda under a gridlocked legislature, they must inevitably establish a governmental strategy that lowers the expectations of the voters, cooperates on the lowest common policy denominator with the influence of a political coalition, and gradually build up a record of political achievements. If there is one important historical task before President Moon Jae-in, it is to build an unprecedentedly successful framework for a political alliance within South Korean politics.

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