



South Korea's Presidential Elections 2012 and Implications for the Region

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On 19 December 2012, South Korean people elected the first woman President of the country. Park Geun-hye of the New Frontier Party (NFP) was able to defeat her rival Moon Jae-in of the United Democratic Party by a narrow margin of 3.5 percent votes. The tough fight between the two candidates could be understood by pointing to the fact that defeated candidate, Moon Jae-in, got 48.2 percent votes which was a record for an opposition candidate since 1987, when South Korea began its journey on the path of a genuine democracy.

The election was important as the voter turnout was almost 76 per cent, which showed the engagement of people with the elections and the enthusiasm to participate to get their candidate elected. Around 90 per cent of the people over 60 year exercised their voting rights and 73 per cent of them supported the NFP candidate Park Geun-hye which became a decisive factor. In general older people in South Korea favour conservative parties and candidates and the demographic shift towards an ageing population, became an insurmountable challenge for Moon Jae-in. In 2002 Presidential elections, around 39 percent voters were in their 20s and 30s which came down to 29 percent in the recent elections. The elections did not change voting behaviour of different generations but the demographic change has brought a huge difference in the results. Park Geun-hye benefited from the regional divide in South Korean politics. As per the voting trends in the country, she got huge support in Yeongnam region, which has been a bastion of conservative politics. Moon Jae-in was also successful in getting huge success in the Honam region as has been the case in the past. Thus the voting behaviour in the elections was not in any way a major departure from the past. Moon Jae-in's failure to align and get support from the leaders of the Chungcheong and Gangwon provinces cost him adversely.

At one point of time, the third and independent candidate Ahn Cheol-soo was considered a symbol of 'New Politics', which demanded a bridge between the fractured political culture of South Korea between conservatives and liberals. His approach attracted huge support in the beginning. However, he realized that a division of votes between Moon Jae-in and himself would mean victory for Park Geun-hye and finally he withdrew in favour of Moon Jae-in. The move helped Moon Jae-in marginally but did not result in a total transfer of Ahn Chul-soo's vote bank to Moon Jae-in.

Park Geun-hye also tried to cleverly incorporate slogan of 'new politics' of Ahn Chul-soo in her election agenda, however, given the nature of her support base and ideological tilt of her party in favour of the upper-class and profiles of people surrounding Park Geun-hye, there was hardly any

chance that she would be able to initiate any substantial measures towards 'economic democracy' or welfare state in the country. Her preferences, most likely, would be growth rather than distribution and she would not have much problem in pursuing her agenda as her party had clear majority in the National Assembly.

A glimpse of Park Geun-hye's future orientation could also be gauged from the fact that she did not categorically distance or criticise her father Park Chung-hee's model of rapid economic growth at the cost of democratic subversion, though she expressed few half-hearted regrets about the suffering of Korean people in those days. It should be noted that her father Park Chung-hee who ruled South Korea from 1962 to 1979 was a controversial figure in the South Korean recent history. He was respected for his contribution to make South Korea a mature and vibrant economy in a very short period of time. However, he was severely criticised for authoritarian rule and brutal abuse of democratic and human rights in the country. After the death of her mother, Park Geun-hye performed the role of the First Lady from 1974 to 1979.

The victory of Park Geun-hye has been linked with the rise of women power in South Korea but a closer look at her policy as well as her preferences makes it obvious that she has not been in any special way connected with women's issues. The issue of equitable gender relations or enhancing the position of women in society was never a priority in her agenda even though there has been a negative correlation between economic prosperity and skewed gender relations.

The implications of Park Geun-hye's victory for the South Korean foreign policy would also be less than a complete change over. Although, she talks about a 'trustpolitik' with North Korea, the general approach of her political party and North Korean scepticism about her intentions would make it difficult for her to start any constructive engagement with Pyongyang. North Korea has been keenly observing her moves and the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un has rendered the first step by showing a conciliatory approach in his New Year message. It would be interesting to see how Park Geun-hye operationalises her North Korea policy and whether she would be able to correct ineffective policy of Lee Myung-bak administration vis-à-vis North Korea.

Her approach towards the US, the closest ally of South Korea, would be similar to previous administration and she would continue to 'upgrade' the close cooperation between the US and South Korea in both security and economic spheres. It would be more interesting to see how she tries to connect with China as in the last five years both countries have got distanced from each other. She needs to realise the importance of China's role in the region to pacify and reach out to North Korea. Over-indulgence with the US would not be helpful in inculcating a constructive partnership with China.

Park Geun-hye has to deal with another uncomfortable partner in Japan where Shinzo Abe has secured victory with a conservative and assertive agenda. He has expressed his desire to visit Yasukuni Shrine along with an unapologetic stand on the Japanese colonial history.

Given deep-rooted anti-Japanese sentiments in South Korea, it would not be possible for Park Geun-hye to forge a relationship of mutual trust and cooperation with Japan if Abe moves ahead with his conservative agenda.

The best part of Park Geun-hye's victory would be sustenance of South Korea's 'New Asia Initiative', which was initiated in 2009. The policy has been responsible for South Korea trying to reach out to Asian partners, including India and forge a comprehensive partnership with them in the fields of security and economics. In all probability the policy would be given further thrust by Park Geun-hye and South Korea's relations with India would further diversify and deepen in the coming years.

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