

# South Korea's Election Outcome: Opposition Party Triumphs, President Yoon Faces Diplomatic And Domestic Challenges



*04-20-2024 ~ Opposition party wins in South Korea's election, posing challenges for President Yoon's governance and foreign relations, notably with China. Despite this, Yoon's alignment with the U.S. and Japan is likely to continue, amid domestic concerns like inflation and medical strikes.*

The liberal opposition party of South Korea has secured a [sweeping majority](#) in the nation's general election, maintaining control of parliament. The Democratic Party (DP), led by Lee Jae-myung, attained 175 out of 300 seats in the National Assembly. This election is widely interpreted as a midterm assessment of President Yoon Suk Yeol, who still has three years remaining in his term. Following the results, the leader of his party, Han Dong-hoon, has stepped down, and Prime Minister Han Duck-soo has tendered his resignation.

Mr. Yoon and his People Power Party (PPP) have suffered a significant setback, grappling to advance their agenda within a legislature controlled by the DP. With the DP's victory, it now has the leverage to expedite and advance legislative initiatives through parliament. The DP and PPP strategically utilize satellite parties to optimize their votes within South Korea's electoral framework, wherein certain seats are allocated to smaller parties whose representation doesn't proportionally match their overall support.

Satellite parties are smaller political entities that align themselves with larger, more established political parties. They often share similar ideologies or goals and cooperate strategically during elections to maximize their collective vote share.

Following his narrow defeat to Mr. Yoon in the 2022 presidential election, Lee Jae-myung is gearing up for another presidential bid. This election marks nearly two years since conservative President Yoon Suk Yeol secured victory in the 2022

presidential race by a razor-thin margin of 0.73 percent, the narrowest in South Korean history, prevailing over Lee.

At the national level, South Korea holds two major types of elections: presidential elections, where citizens directly elect the president for a single five-year term, and National Assembly elections, which determine the composition of the legislative body consisting of 300 members. These members serve a four-year term. Among them, 254 are elected through single-seat constituencies, while the remaining 46 members are selected through a proportional representation system. In the proportional representation system, voters vote for political parties rather than individual candidates, and the proportion of votes each party receives determines their seat allocation in the National Assembly.

In the 2024 South Korean general election, three main political parties competed for seats in the National Assembly. With 175 seats won, the Democratic Party became the largest party. The ruling People Power Party (PPP) secured 108 seats, while the Rebuilding Korea Party (RKP), led by former justice minister Cho Kuk, won 12 seats. Notably, the RKP obtained its seats solely through proportional representation, without fielding candidates for district positions. The overall voter turnout was 67 percent, marking the highest turnout in 32 years. Approximately 44 million people were eligible to vote in the National Assembly election, held on April 10, 2024.

### *Key Issues*

The rising cost of living and inflation emerged as key concerns for voters, particularly the escalating prices of essential goods like vegetables. During the election campaign, President Yoon Suk-yeol's visit to a supermarket brought attention to the issue, focusing on the price of green onions. Upon observing a bunch of green onions priced at 875 won (\$0.65), he [commented](#), "I've been to many markets, and this seems like a reasonable price." However, [media reports](#) state that green onions typically now sell for three or four times that amount and local media reported that the store had discounted the vegetable ahead of Yoon's visit.

In March 2024, South Korea's annual inflation rate was at [3.1 percent](#). The primary contributors to this inflationary trend were the increased prices of fresh food and energy. In March, the prices of agricultural products surged by over 20 percent compared to the same month last year.

Another main concern in the election was the doctors' strike. All medical interns and residents, actively practicing doctors, are rallying against Yoon's proposition to boost the annual medical school admission quota by two-thirds to mitigate the doctor shortage. They contend that universities are ill-prepared to handle such a substantial surge in student intake, which could jeopardize forthcoming medical services.

Despite South Korea's rapidly aging population and its low doctor-to-population ratio compared to other developed nations, attempts to increase medical school capacities have consistently encountered staunch resistance from incumbent doctors and medical students, resulting in significant political obstacles.

At first, Yoon's proposal received public backing. However, increasing pressure for compromise arose as a result of the ongoing doctor strikes, causing numerous surgeries to be canceled and disrupting patient care.

### *Implications*

The victory of the main opposition party indicates the continuation of strained relations between President Yoon and the legislative body. Since taking office, President Yoon has encountered consistent opposition to his domestic policies from the National Assembly, which is largely controlled by the opposition, holding approximately 60 percent of the seats. As of January 2024, only 29.2 percent of the bills presented to the National Assembly have been passed into law, a significant decrease from the 61.4 percent passage rate seen under the previous administration.

For months, President Yoon has struggled with low approval ratings, impeding his efforts to fulfill his promises of tax cuts, deregulation, and increased support for families in the world's fastest-aging society.

The Yoon administration's foreign policy has been characterized by a persistent alignment with the United States and Japan while distancing South Korea from China. Since assuming office, Yoon has been actively disrupting the relatively balanced diplomatic relations maintained by previous administrations and significantly straining China-South Korea relations.

Yoon's alignment with the United States has also adversely affected the interests of the South Korean people. For instance, in the economic realm, South Korea has prioritized compliance with U.S. semiconductor export controls on China.

Previously, South Korea had enjoyed close cooperation with China, resulting in a significant trade surplus. However, since joining the U.S.-proposed “Chip 4” alliance, South Korea has suffered considerable losses, while facing warnings from the U.S. against filling the void in the Chinese market. Yoon’s foreign policy has strained relations between China and South Korea, exacerbating trade and economic issues and eroding public support for Yoon.

When confronted with Japan’s discharge of nuclear-contaminated wastewater into the ocean, Yoon staged a symbolic act of eating seafood but failed to take substantive action in response to widespread public protests.

Nonetheless, it’s anticipated that South Korea’s foreign policy stance, including its trilateral cooperation with the United States and Japan, will remain relatively unchanged. The election outcomes are unlikely to exert significant influence on international affairs, and the president retains considerable autonomy to pursue his agenda. Yoon is expected to maintain a more assertive stance towards North Korea. His approach to North Korea sharply contrasts with that of the previous progressive administration, emphasizing negotiations and engagement.

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