

Report on the South Korea 2014 July 31st By-Election

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Opinions or points of view expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Hanns Seidel Foundation Korea

Background

South Korea regularly holds by-election twice every year to fill in the positions of National Assembly, Provincial Government, Local Assembly, and other administrative positions that become vacant due to various reasons including death, resignations, election fraud, and criminal charges. Since the year 2000, by-elections were regularly scheduled on the last Wednesday of April and last Wednesday of October every year. Should there be presidential or National Assembly elections, the by-elections are held along with such elections. In the year of local election, the by-elections are held on the last Wednesday of July. As the June Local Elections of year 2014 was held, the by-election was scheduled to be on the last Wednesday of July, July 30th this year. The positions available for this year's by-elections were 15 vacant National Assembly positions: *Seoul Dongjak-Gu Eul* District, *Gyeonggi Suwon-Si Eul* District, *Gyeonggi Suwon-Si Jung* District, *Gyeonggi Suwon-Si Byung* District, *Gyeonggi Pyungtaek-Si Eul* District, *Gyeonggi Gimpo-Si* District, *Busan Haeundae-Gu Gijang-Gun Gap* District, *Gwangju Gwangsan-Gu Eul* District, *Daejeon Daeduck-Gu* District, *Ulsan Namgu Eul* District, *North Chungcheong Chungju-Si* District, *South Chungcheong Seosan-Si Taeahn-Gun* District, *South Jeolla Suncheon-Si*, *Gokseong-Gun* District, *South Jeolla Damyang-Gun Hampyeong-Gun*, *Yeonggwang-Gun Jangseong-Gun* District, and *South Jeolla Naju-Si Hawsoon-Gun* District. The election concluded with 32.9% voting rate with 7.89% preliminary vote¹.

Result

Despite its small size and few positions open up for grabs, most political parties in Korea place a lot of significance and effort to the by-election, as it indirectly represents the overall view of political atmosphere before a major election. Historically, by-elections were often considered as the “graveyard” for the ruling party, as the ruling party never took a majority seat from the by-elections from 1999 to 2010. However, the 2014 July by-election ended up as a landslide victory for the ruling conservative party, the Saenuri Party, which took eleven seats out of fifteen seats. This election further solidified the Saenuri Party's majority in the National Assembly from 147 seats out of 302 seats before the by-election to 158 seats out of 302 seats, giving the most number of seats to ruling party in the history of National Assembly. For the main opposition party, the New Political Alliance for Democracy (NPAD), missed a vital chance to weaken the majority rule of Saenuri Party. The chart below is an outlook of the results of 2014 July by-election:

| District: | Elected Candidate | Party Association |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| <i>Seoul Dongjak-Gu Eul</i> | Na Gyung-Won | Saenuri Party |

¹ Foster-Carter, Aidan. "What's Left in South Korea? - Korea Real Time - WSJ." *Korea Real Time* RSS. Wall Street Journal, 01 Aug. 2014. Web. 04 Aug. 2014.

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|--|-----------------------|----------------------|
| District | | |
| <i>Gyeonggi Suwon-Si Eul</i> District | Jung Mi-Gyung | Saenuri Party |
| <i>Gyeonggi Suwon-Si Jung</i> District | Park Gwang-Ohn | NPAD |
| <i>Gyeonggi Suwon-Si Byung</i> District | Kim Yong-Nam | Saenuri Party |
| <i>Gyeonggi Pyungtaek-Si Eul</i> District | Yu Ui-Dong | Saenuri Party |
| <i>Gyeonggi Gimpo-Si</i> District | Hong Chul-Ho | Saenuri Party |
| <i>Busan Haeundae-Gu</i> <i>Gijang-Gun Gap</i> District | Bae Deok-Gwang | Saenuri Party |
| <i>Gwangju Gwangsan-Gu Eul</i> District | Kwon Eun-Hee | NPAD |
| <i>Daejeon Daeduck-Gu</i> District | Jung Yong-Gi | Saenuri Party |
| <i>Ulsan Namgu Eul</i> District | Park Mang-Woo | Saenuri Party |
| <i>North Chungcheong</i> <i>Chungju-Si</i> District | Lee Jong-Bae | Saenuri Party |
| <i>South Chungcheong</i> <i>Seosan-Si Taeahn-Gun</i> District | Kim Jae-Shik | Saenuri Party |
| <i>South Jeolla Suncheon-Si,</i> <i>Gokseong-Gun</i> District | Lee Jung-Hyun | Saenuri Party |
| <i>South Jeolla Damyang-Gun</i> <i>Hampyeong-Gun,</i> <i>Yeonggwang-Gun</i> <i>Jangseong-Gun</i> District | Shin Jung-Hoon | NPAD |
| <i>South Jeolla Naju-Si</i> <i>Hawsoon-Gun</i> District | Lee Gae-Ho | NPAD |

There were a lot of significant and interesting events during this year's By-Election. One of the most significant and dramatic event is probably the Saenuri Party's victory in South Jeolla Suncheon-Si Gokseong-Gun District. The district has been a strong foothold of the liberal parties since 1988 when the National Assembly election transferred from indirect election to popular election after the democratization of South Korea. In terms of regional perspective, the Jeolla Provinces is a strong foothold for the liberal party, and the South Jeolla Suncheon-Si Gokseong-Gun District has always been voting for liberal party counterpart for the past 26 years. However, Lee Jung-Hyun, Saenuri Party's candidate for the district, has been for the first time elected as a conservative representative to National Assembly in the district. This unexpected turn of event was further dramatized not only because Lee Jung-Hyun is President Park's man, but also because his opponent, Suh Gap-Won, is a liberal political tycoon known as the right-hand man of former President Roh Moo-Hyun. Newly elected representative Lee Jung-Hyun stated, "I am

sure the citizens were deeply moved by the people of Suncheon-Si and Gokseong-Gun, as this election is a starting step in changing the South Korean politics and regionalism.”²

Gyeonggi Suwon-Si Byung District also had an unexpected be-election result. NPAD political magnate, Sohn Hak-Gyu, who served as National Assemblyman four times and Gyeonggi Provincial Governor, was defeated by Kim Yong-Nam, who had no previous political experience or career. Defeat of NPAD political magnates, Sohn Hak-Gyu and Suh Gap-Won by Saenuri Party’s newbie politicians was both a much unexpected turn of event for this year’s 2014 By-Election. This year’s By-Election is regarded as a resurgence of conservatives and a balancing effect of July 4th Local Elections. Regions, especially in Gyeonggi Provinces, where Saenuri Party dominated, were the same region that voted for NPAD during the local elections. Comparing the results of this year’s Local Election and By-Election, NPAD faced a huge defeat.

Election Process

Even from the start, the opposition parties and liberal groups were largely divided, while the conservative, ruling party maintained a unified front. For example, Seoul Dongjak-Gu Eul District, which was the most heated and competitive election site, had one conservative representative Saenuri Party, while the liberal opposition was divided into four parties: NPDA, Unified Progressives, Justice Party, and Labor Party. This divided opposition occurred not only in Seoul Dongjak-Gu but also in Gyeonggi Suwon-Si Byung Eul District, Gyonggi Gimpo-Si District, and Southern Jeolla Suncheon-Si Gokseong-Gun District. Failure of opposition side to formulate a unified candidate against the well-established Saenuri Party in the beginning is regarded as one of the biggest reasons of failure. In Seoul Dongjak-Gu Eul, the opposition, which the NPAD candidate Ki Dong-Min’s and Unified Progressives candidate Yu Sun-Hee’s withdrawal from the election, did establish a unified front with Justice Party candidate, Noh Hwae-Chan against Saenuri’s Na Gyung-Won very last minute of the election. However, candidate Noh was defeated by candidate Na by a very small margin of 920 votes.

Nearing the day of election, the opposition parties eventually formed a unified candidate and platform against Saenuri Party’s candidates. Gyoneggi Suwon-Si Byung and Jung Districts experienced withdrawal of Justice Party for opposition coalition. Due to last minute coalition efforts by NPAD, Unified Progressives, and Justice Party, the opinion poll at some point predicted nine districts under a close competition between Saenuri Party and the opposition party³. However, the coalition from opposition was too last minute and ineffective. Suwon-Si Eul, Gimpo-Si, and South Jeolla Hampyeong-Gun Jangseong-Gun and Yeonggwang-Gun never reached a coalition by the opposition.

² “Lee Jung-Hyun Dangsun, Jeonnam 26nyun man-ui saenuri ui-won tansang... ‘sogam-eun?’ “이정현 당선, 전남서 26년만의 새누리 의원 탄생... “소감은?” [Lee Jung-Hyun Elected, the First Saenuri National Representative Elected in Jeonnam Region in 26 years... “thoughts?”] *MBN* 31 July, 2014.

³ Ha, Yoon-Hae 하윤해, and Choi, Seung-Wook 최승욱. “7-30 Jaebosun D-2, Neul-uh-nan ‘kyunghap jiyeeok’... yecheuk bulheo bakbing-ui dajupjeon” [7-30 재보선 D-2] 늘어난 ‘경합지역’... 예측불허 박빙의 대접전 [7-30 By-Election D-2, Increased Areas of ‘Political Battlegrounds’... Unpredictable Nip and Tuck Match]. *Kukmin Ilbo* 28 July, 2014.

There were also some scandals that surfaced during the election. Gwangju Gwangsan-Gu Eul District NPAD candidate, Kwon Eun-Hee, was allegedly accused of not reporting her and her husband's financial assets including buildings, stocks, and real-estates. This accusation was raised by *NEWSTAPA*, one of Korea's investigative journalism agencies. With National Election Commission of South Korea's (NEC) thorough investigation, NEC dismissed the accusation against candidate Kwon Eun-Hee and gave a warning towards *NEWSTAPA* for its possibility of negatively influencing the election campaign. However, the alleged accusation brought impactful negatives that Saenuri Party played against NPAD during the election.

Saenuri Party's Victorious Strategy

Saenuri Party or its previous counterparts have always utilized a conventional strategy when it faced a difficult and tense political atmosphere: economy, growth, and development. Former President Lee, presidential candidate of former conservative Grand National Party, criticized the stagnant economy during President Roh's Administration. He even earned a majority votes with a nickname of "bulldozer", as if he would clear the ways for South Korea's economic development. President Park during her campaign also emphasized the "creative economy" that would develop the quality of South Korea's economy and make a transition from "hardware" Korea to "software" Korea. Again, Saenuri Party took on the conventional campaign rhetoric at this 2014 By-Election, which President Park emphasized the era of KOSPI (Korean Composite Stock Price Index) to reach 3000 by end of her term. Her slogan and rhetoric have gained some confidence, as KOSPI recently experienced constant rise and reached 2,093 points⁴ (highest in three years) by the election day of July 30th. Her slogan further supported the candidates of by-election for the ruling party, as the Sinking of Ferry *Sewol* have depressed the economic activities ever since April. However, President Park's direct involvement of the 2014 By-Election campaign was not present. According to the Korea Times, the candidates of Saenuri Party almost never attached themselves to President Park or produced campaign materials involving President Park. Analysts explain this change in campaign strategy of Saenuri Party is due to its falling approval rate of President Park after her controversial ministry-level appointment scandals and government's ill-handling of the Sinking of Ferry *Sewol*⁵.

Another effective strategy that Saenuri Party took was a strategy that deals with regional based economic approach. Known as the "budget bomb" and "budget pooling" most of the Saenuri-Party candidates presented a platform that would pull and pool the funds from central government for regional infrastructural and economic development. For example in the dramatic victory of Saenuri Party's Lee Jung-Hyun in South Jeolla Suncheon-Si Gokseong-Gun District, Lee Jung-Hyun has emphasized the "budget bomb" that would bring the district with prosperity and development. He promised to attract Suncheon University Medical Campus and to invite large-corporations to Suncheon Industrial Complex, which would aid and stimulate the economic development of the region. Such strategy focusing on the region and regional economic development gave the victory to political newbie Kim Yong-Nam of Saenuri Party against Sohn Hak-Gyu, a NKPD political magnate in Gyeonggi Suwon-Si Byeong District. To lure the public opinion towards Saenuri Party, Kim Yong-Nam promised a construction of extended metro Shin-Bundang Line from Kwanggyo to Homaeshil, directly connecting the region to Seoul. Kim

⁴ 31 July, 2014 KOSPI Index

⁵ Kang, Seung-Woo. "11:4 Saenuri Wins by Landslide" *Korea Times*, Korea Times, 31 July, 2014. Print 04 Aug. 2014.

promised to acquire budget for the construction of metro Shin-Bundang Line from the central government⁶. This form of “budget pooling” for the region prompted by Saenuri Party may have given an upper hand for Kim Young-Nam in the election.

Furthermore, candidate Na of Seoul Dongjak-Gu Eul District promised to make Dongjak a Gangnam 4th District by pooling budget to make a tunnel that would connect Dongjak Sadang-Road and Gangnam Tehran-Road to make a “Gangnam Belt.” She promised to increase the standard of living for people of Dongjak-Gu to that of Gangnam⁷. Candidate Hong for Gyeonggi Gimpo-Si District promised the creation of Han Gang Pyeong-Hwa Express Way and other urban infrastructure necessary for economic development. Candidate Yu of Gyeonggi Pyeongtaek-Si Eul District promised to channel government investment on Pyeongtaek Port and making of Pyeongtaek-Si as an educational city to attract households. These economic and regional based platforms are part of the “budget bomb” or “budget pooling” strategy that Saenuri Party took to win over the seats in the districts.

Lastly, Saenuri Party nominated the candidates who were either from or closely related to the region that they were running for. Na Gyung-Won was born in Seoul Dongjak-Gu, and so as Lee Jung-Hyun and Kim Yong-Nam in their respective districts. The local and regional-based nomination of candidates played a major role in moving the hearts and votes of the locals. This nomination strategy is different from the nomination of NPAD, which often placed candidates in the region who do not have much affiliation or ties to the district.

NKPD's Strategy and its Failure

As the By-Elections are known as the “graveyard” of the ruling party, it is somewhat true that NPAD was generally more relaxed than the Saenuri Party and did not meticulously prepare for the upcoming elections. Despite the plummeting approval rate of Saenuri Party and President Park after the Sinking of Ferry *Sewol* incident and cabinet appointment scandal, the opposition was not able to utilize the tide of ruling party disapproval to its advantage. From the start, NPAD and rest of the opposing party experienced serious disunity and nomination conflicts. Many criticized the NPAD leadership, led by Ahn Chul-Soo and Kim Han-Gil (known as Ahn-Kim Line), for its candidate district nomination scandals. To place political newbie Kwon Eun-Hee, who was a former police officer and a lawyer, to the heart district of NPAD Gwangju Eul District, Ahn-Kim Line sent candidate Ki Dong-Min, who was already preparing his campaign in the Gwangji Eul District, to Seoul Dongjak-Gu. Candidate Kwon Eun-Hee received a spotlight at the public hearings as she confessed about the pressure exerted by the Commission General of the Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency during the investigation of National Intelligence Service (NIS) Manipulating the Public Opinion during the 2012 Elections. After her confession, she became a politician for NPAD. With her confession, many experts regard Kwon Eun-Hee's nomination to the heart district of NPAD as a “compensation nomination” for her confession

⁶ Koo, Kyung-Min 구경민. “Gangnam 4gu, geuphang yeulcha, daehak yuchi...jiyeok jungchaek gogyak tonghaetda” 강남 4 구, 급행열차, 대학유치...지역 정책 공약 통했다 [Gangnam 4District, Express Train, Attracting University Campus...Local-Based Platform Worked]. *MoneyToday News* 31 July, 2014

⁷ Koo.

about the external pressure exerted during investigation process of NIS Involvement of 2012 General Election⁸.

Nomination for Kwon Eun-Hee in Gwanju Eul District led to disregarding of Chun Jung-Bae, former Minister of Justice, for potential candidacy. Ki Dong-Min, who was moved to Seoul Dongjak Gu District, clashed with Heo Dong-Joon, NPAD District Chairman for Dongjak Gu District, for candidacy. Due to such nomination scandals, Gwangju District voting rate, 22.3%, was the lowest out of all fifteen districts⁹. This is a significant message that shows a disappointment of people of Gwangju towards NPAD and Kwon Eun-Hee, as Gwangju District always marks the highest voting rate every time when elections are held. This kind of nomination mishap is one of the worst criticisms that NPAD has received from the public. Ahn-Kim Line was severely criticized for its failure to produce a unified opposition front against Saenuri Party, scandals in candidate nomination process, and its inability to create a solid and coherent platform for the election.

Unlike Saenuri Party, NPAD entirely played on the “Judgment of Ruling Party” for the campaign strategy, as Park Administration failed to rescue passengers and manage the incident. Further disapproval and disappointment loomed over Saenuri Party due to concurrent events of President Park’s failure to appoint cabinet members, and current administration’s failure to effectively execute the investigation of Yoo Byung-Hun, who is the mastermind of political corruption and Sinking of Ferry *Sewol* incident. These three major events that led to falling approval rate of Saenuri Party seemed to give NPAD a huge advantage over the elections campaign. However, there were no other solidified platform that NPAD presented to the locals, and NPAD was heavily criticized for not considering the locality for the election that actually impacted the life of the locals. While Saenuri Party appealed locally with more economic and realistic policies, NPAD placed candidates that are usually unrelated with the region and attempted to appeal the public with rhetoric of “judgment day” for the ruling party.

Some media blamed NPAD’s defeat due to over-politicizing the Sinking of Ferry *Sewol*, which was used for political purposes rather than proposing plans and policies to effectively address the incident¹⁰. The poll conducted by The Opinion revealed that 60% of the constituency did not vote for NPAD due to its intent to utilize the incident for political purposes. Some say that division of opposition and failing to come up with an agreed framework disappointed many people who supported the NPAD. Others added that the opposition’s lacking actions and response to passing of special bill for the Sinking *Sewol* Incident led to loss of NPAD supporters. So in other words, NPAD and the opposition parties criticized Saenuri Party without proposing a solid plan or policy as its platform.

⁸ Kwon, Sun-Hwal 권순환. “Kwon Eun-Hee Shik ‘Gosok Chulsae’ui guneul” [권은희식 ‘고속 출세’의 그늘]. *Dong-A Ilbo* 04 August, 2014.

⁹ Sohn, Sang-Won 손상원. “Kwon Eun-Hee Dangsun Kwangju Kwangsan-Eul Topyo-yuel choijuh...baekyung eun” 권은희 당선 광주 광산을 투표율 최저...배경은 [Kwon Eun-Hee Elected Gwangju Kwangsan-Eul District has the Lowest Voting Rate...Background]. *Yonhap News* 30 July, 2014.

¹⁰ Jung, Sae-Young 정세영. “Yadang, Sewol-ho jungchijeok yiyonghae sungeo champae” 야당, 세월호 정치적 이용해 선거 참패 [Opposition Party, Severely Defeated due to Politicizing *Sewol*]. *TV Chosun* 02 August, 2014.

Overall, this year's By-Election gave a huge blow to NPAD, as Ahn Chul-Soo and Kim Han-Gil resigned from the leadership position. Following the Ahn-Kim Line, many of the experienced and political magnates of NPAD, including Sohn Hak-Gyu, resigned from the political field. With its inability and failure to cease the political atmosphere, the future of NPAD and the opposition parties looks grim.

Concluding Remarks

This year's By-Election ended as a victory for the ruling party by a landslide. Despite three major issues and incidents: Sinking of Ferry, President Park's failure to effectively appoint her cabinet members, and government's inability to execute proper investigation that NPAD could have take advantage of, NPAD's leadership failed to show a consolidation and determination. *Kyunghyang Shimun* criticized the leadership of NPAD as "...incompetent, irresponsible, and illegitimate."¹¹ At the same time, Saenuri Party's main strategy of "budget bomb" or "budget pooling" is almost impossible for implementation, as the local government debts are now surfacing 97 billion USD¹². It is likely that the economic platform and strategy that Saenuri Party presented are going to be simple rhetoric, as most of its platforms were in the previous elections.

This election got to be a painful and devastating experience for the opposition parties, and it also has revealed that Saenuri Party's conventional campaign strategy with economic emphasis is still proven effective when it needs to garner votes for the election. Hopefully, this By-Election served as powerful messages to divided and contending opposition parties. One is that the divided opposition cannot win against the well-consolidated conservative ruling party. Thus, a pre-planned and harmonious unified opposition must be created to successfully challenge the ruling party from the start. Two is that the opposition and NPAD must have a solid platform and a plan that would address and solve the problems caused by the ruling party. Criticism of the ruling party without plans and solution can deliver a stronger backlash to the opposition. Last is that the opposition must reestablish legitimacy. Criticizing President Park with her inability to appoint proper cabinet member on time seems somewhat hypocritical when NPAD itself is suffering from its candidate nomination scandals.

¹¹ Koo, Hae-Young 구혜영. "Minshim-eun wae yadang-eul buryeotnah, Kim Han-Gil-Ahn Chul-Soo, sashimi gongcheon...sungeo junryakdo upgoh yakwon yeondae-aen mu chaek-Im" 민심은 왜 야당을 버렸나, 김한길-안철수, 사심 공천... 선거 전략도 없고 야권 연대엔 무책임" [Why did the People Turn Against the Opposition Party, Kim Han-Gil-Ahn Chul-Soo, Personal Nomination...Absent Campaign Strategy and Irresponsible for Opposition Coalition]. *KyungHyang Ilbo* 31 July, 2014.

¹² Kim, Hak-Joon 김학준. "100jo-won bitduhmi-ae olla-ahnjeun jibang jeongbu-deul" 100 조원 빚더미에 올라앉은 지방정부들 [Local Government Carrying Debts over 100 Trillion Won]. *EconomicInsights* 01 Sept. 2014.

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