On December 17, 2019, President of South Korea Moon Jae-in nominated former Speaker of the National Assembly, Chung Sye-kyun, for the post of Prime Minister. "I want to explain directly to the people about the nomination for the next prime minister," Moon said. "The government has so far exerted special efforts to get rid of outdated systems in our society and build an economy that is innovative, inclusive and equitable... the most important thing is establishing national unity and producing outcomes in the economy that the people can actually experience. We believe Chung is the right person to meet the needs of our times."

This statement caused a stir, as it implied that Lee Nak-yeon had failed in the above task, even though up until recently he had faced no criticism even from the conservative opposition.

Chung Sye-kyun is considered an economic expert and ‘a man capable of ensuring greater cohesion between government and parliament in his new position.’ He graduated from the Korea University Law School, then studied for his Master’s in administration and management in the United States, afterwards completing post-graduate studies in management at Kyonggi University. After 17 years of holding a senior position in the South Korean corporation SsangYong Group, Chung worked in government under President Kim Dae-jung. During President Roh Moo-hyun’s term, he served as Minister of Commerce, Industry and Energy. From June 2016 to May 2018, he served as Speaker of the National Assembly, ‘having experience (arguably fruitless, in the author’s opinion) in promoting
cooperation between the ruling party and the opposition.’ If Chung is appointed, he will be the first ever Speaker to assume the post of Prime Minister.

He himself stated that he feels a strong sense of responsibility to revive the economy and facilitate communication with the population, promising to do his utmost to achieve economic progress and social unity.

The opposition expressed concerns about Chung Sye-kyun’s nomination, saying that it goes against the principle of the separation of powers if the former head of the legislative branch is given No. 2 post in the executive branch. According to the opposition Liberty Korea Party, this is a dictatorial attempt aimed at bending the Parliament to the will of the country’s administration.

But Moon refutes these fears. According to him, Chung has always put dialogue and compromise at the forefront of his policy, and in times of intense divisive confrontations, the ability to respect and cooperate with the opposition, as well as strive for the unity and harmony of the people is most vital. It bears recalling how Chung ‘put compromise at the forefront’ during the Candlelight Revolution and the subsequent political purges.

South Korean experts painted them as an effort to renew the atmosphere in state structures and to strengthen efforts on implementing the state’s policy. In addition, this rearrangement is also connected to the plans of the current head of government, Lee Nak-yeon, to participate in the parliamentary elections scheduled for next year.

What does all of this entail? The change of Prime Minister in South Korea is a very important event in the political process which merits attention. In the South Korean political system, Prime Ministers do not have much power. They usually resign after a crisis or scandal, as if accepting responsibility for them and shifting it away from the President. However, this isn’t the case with Lee Nak-yeon; he has proven to be quite good at crisis management, capable of smoothly dealing with unexpected situations, be it outbreaks of infectious diseases, African swine fever, etc. That’s why he held this position for two and a half years, which is a more or less record time for a South Korean Prime Minister in the 21st century.

Lee is being replaced on the eve of elections to the National Assembly, in which he intends to participate in the spring of 2020. In fact, the social status of an Assembly member in South Korea is probably higher than that of a government official. Experts have repeatedly criticized the South Korean political system for the fact that future Assembly members seek to serve as ministers for the sake of a line in their pre-election CVs, holding the position for a little more than a year on average. A political figure is unlikely to be able to truly delve into the problems of their department within such a short term, and the only thing they would be capable of doing is maintain the general party line. It is clear that this is the reason why the quality of recent decisions has visibly plummeted. In addition, earlier Moon Jae-in used to switch cabinet ministers not just because they had not met expectations and competence requirements, but also to let them serve as Assembly members. In this difficult domestic political and economic situation, parliamentary elections will be quite an important political event which will decide the current balance of power between the conservative and ruling parties. Currently, the balance is such that there is no decisive advantage for either, and the work of parliament is often paralyzed by factional conflicts. If conservatives strengthen their position, Moon could become a lame duck prematurely, although officially his term would end in 2022. This could permanently hinder progress in inter-Korean relations, but, most importantly, the Conservatives could launch an offensive course that could lead to an attempt at impeaching the president. Therefore, Moon is already making every effort to fill the parliament with the right people, whose skills will help him deal with emergency situations, and add a lot of new blood: the ruling Democratic Party plans to nominate about 40 new candidates for the upcoming general elections, which will make up about a third of the current 129 members.

It should also be noted that Lee Nak-yeon is perceived as a possible successor to Moon, or rather, as the Democrat candidate in the 2022 presidential election. Firstly, he is not a representative of the anti-Moon faction, like Ahn Hee-jung, who was convicted of sexual harassment, or Lee Jae-myung, who was neutralized by prosecution. Then again, unlike Cho Kuk or Kim Kyoung-soo, who are very close to Moon, Lee has faced no high-profile scandals requiring the president's administrative resources to escape serious prison sentences. And finally, if Lee wins the presidential election, South Korea could have a leader who has valuable experience in administrative non-partisan leadership. In this context, the resignation of the Prime Minister can be seen as an operation to secure a successor.

Of course, there are differing opinions. Some say that Moon is trying to get rid of an opponent who is not currently the head of a faction but has the potential to become one. Others say that Lee, as a pragmatist, had been holding back outright populists and lessening the inadequacies of recent decisions, after which he was removed so he would stop interfering.
In any case, changing the Prime Minister without an obvious scandal is a striking event in South Korean politics, the consequences of which should be noted by experts. The year 2020, a year of parliamentary elections, may significantly change the domestic political situation in South Korea.

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