A Chronicle of the Pre-election Race in ROK: Conservatives and their Feuds

The main problem of the People Power Party is the lack of popular leaders in its own environment, which is why the leader of the Democratic Party, Song Young-gil, even called it “sterile”. Officially, the conservatives themselves have enough candidates for the presidency, but the best of them come in at about 3-4%, possibly getting fourth place in the rating, and not all of them have officially declared their presidential ambitions. We will name the more prominent ones.

- Former party leader Hong Joon-pyo, who ran against Moon in 2017 as the main candidate for the conservatives, announced his decision on August 17. In March 2020, Hong left the party to protest a decision it made to deprive him of the right to run in the 2020 parliamentary elections on a party membership card, and ran as an independent candidate - but then later returned to his fellows.
- Another former conservative leader, Hwang Kyo-ahn, who used to be a prime minister during the Park Geun-hye administration, and previously a notorious (see the case involving the United Progressive Party) justice minister, was one of those who advocated for impeachment, counting on being appointed acting president, and is now trying to rally the right around him and rely on votes cast by Park supporters.
- Former Just Future Party leader Yoo Seong-min opposed Park Geun-hye even before the candle revolution, and then split from the conservatives with the creation of the Bareun Future Party, but returned back to the main party after his project failed to take off. It would seem that this schismatic does not have much of a chance, but he is the
political mentor of the party’s current leader, Lee Jun-seok, which is why it is believed that the mentor has pushed his student toward this post so that Yu would ensure his victory in the presidential elections. Against this general background, he is considered to be moderate or right of center, and in particular advocating progressive taxation.

- Won Hee-ryong, the Governor of Jeju Province, announced that he would run for president on July 27. The former opposition party deputy vowed to turn over everything that Moon Jae-in’s government has done. “I would like to offer a vision of a country that values happiness for every person, where the next generation flourishes, and where people, nature, and civilization can coexist.”

As for the young star, 36-year-old Lee Jun-seok, the party’s current leader, even though he is often included in the polls, where he was ahead of other conservatives, he is still not eligible for the presidency due to his age. In addition, as soon as the party decides on a single candidate, he (or she) will be the real leader of the conservatives, and not Lee Jun-seok.

Now let us move on to the outsider candidates, since the black-and-white logic of the political struggle is causing this camp to “engulf” all of Moon’s opponents. Fourth place in the overall rating for the candidates is now held by Choi Jae-cheon, who used to be in charge of the Board of Audit and Inspection. In this position, he supervised the investigation that Moon Jae-in’s presidential aides took part in, which led to conflicts with the ruling party and administration, and then to his resignation. On August 4, Choi officially proclaimed his intention to take part in the presidential elections. However, almost immediately, while communicating with reporters, Choi displayed and admitted his lack of preparedness to deal with a number of key problems: “I apologize, but I have not been in politics that long, and for now I cannot answer that question.”

And first or second place in the overall rating (some of the candidates are neck and neck, plus different agencies seem to be inflating the scores for their own favorites) is occupied by the former Prosecutor General Yoon Seok-youl, about whom we have written repeatedly. Yoon has created an image for himself as a champion of “justice”, by opposing the current administration after investigating allegations of corruption leveled against key figures in the ruling bloc. However, Lee’s problems are similar to those that Choi has: not being a professional politician, he often makes controversial statements outside the scope of his competency as a prosecutor, and there have been quite a few of those. Even conservative media outlets have described all this, and afterwards Yoon’s team hired a professional image consultant to help him better enunciate his words, and improve his manners.

But even though Yoon Seok-yeol does not have much of a chance, the relations between him and the “core” of the conservative party are reminiscent of those between Lee Jae-myung and the democratic leadership. Yoon is perceived by them as an outsider, and by some other as basically the person who took part in condemning Park Geun-hye and Lee Myung-bak.

This is precisely why Yoon hesitated for quite a long time, and his relationship with Lee Jun-seok did not come together immediately - who, to put it mildly, is not someone who is among his fans. Even back in March 2021, before Yoon joined the conservatives, Lee recorded a YouTube video stating that he would “leave this Earth” if Yoon were to be elected president. In another YouTube video from December 2019, Lee said that the party he belongs to will win, paving the way for Yoo Seong-min.

All this does not benefit the image of the party in the best possible way: as The Korea Herald notes, “a split in the opposition bloc reduces the chances of a change of power in 2022.” And that is why Yoon was battered in the media for yet another slip of the tongue, and Lee as well for “seeming to enjoy making headlines over the past two months as he has focused on increasing his personal influence, rather than being a fair manager.”

What can be said is that it looks as if the conservatives will keep bickering more earnestly than the democrats and, according to Shin Yul, a professor of political science and diplomacy at Myongji University, the struggle between factions will be sharper because while the Democrats have fewer factions - and a significant portion of party members supports President Moon Jae-in - the conservatives do not have an equally clear leader who is well-respected. The likelihood of reformatting the party field is also still high: before presidential elections, the party often changes its name, as if shedding an old skin.

**A third force?**

None exists at the level of serious candidates. Reluctance to split the electorate, and the logic behind the struggle between the factions involved, also have an effect. Therefore, everyone is saying that it would be nice to get past the confrontation between the conservatives and democrats, but after Yoon Seok-yeol left to join the People Power anyway, only Ahn Cheol-soo from the People Party remained on the field.
It is worth reiterating that this politician ran in the 2012 elections, but withdrew in favor of Moon. For a while, they led the democratic party in unison, but then Ahn and his supporters broke away and formed the provisionally centrist People Party, one in which, to be sure, Kim Dae-jung’s old associates that were dissatisfied with Moon essentially scraped Ahn away from the leadership. After that, Ahn unsuccessfully tried to unite himself with Yoo Seong-min and his party with those to the right of center, but that also failed, and now his party has about three mandates and a strange reputation.

But while it was not clear where Yoon would go, Ahn actively offered himself up to conservatives as someone who makes headlines, with a recognizable name, and a person who is not associated with the classic version of conservatives. Former party leader Kim Chong-in, who wanted to make the party more centrist and less conservative, sympathized with this, but he still did not attain success, and in April 2021 he left his post.

On June 22, 2021, conservatives and centrist began working-level consultations anyway, but were unable to reach an agreement because of a host of disagreements. First, Ahn offered himself up for the candidate post despite the fact that the rating for his party was extremely low, and second, so that the union did not look like a takeover of his faction, he suggested that the united party change its name. Third, they say that the irresistible force has met the immovable object - Li, despite his young age, behaved in quite a harsh and authoritarian manner, and in the People Party he was publicly called a “teenager”. On August 16, Ahn Cheol-soo stated that the People Power Party and People Party did not manage to agree on merging the parties. When asked if he would run for the presidency next year, Ahn said: “I will have time to speak separately about plans for the future.”

However, according to some experts Ahn Cheol-soo will try another round of negotiations after the People Power Party chooses its presidential candidate in November. And this again will play on the fact that it will be difficult for the opposition bloc to win the elections without nominating a single candidate.

This means that in both camps the alignment of forces is quite consistent with the dynamics in the "Game of Thrones", which indicates that scandals and scheming will make the new season no less interesting than previous ones.

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