New Old Mayor of Seoul

On August 31, 2021, South Korean police raided Seoul City Hall as part of an investigation into allegations that Seoul Mayor Oh Se-hoon spread false information during his election campaign. Investigators searched some City Hall offices, including the city planning and transport policy bureaus, for seven hours to seize documents related to Oh Se-hoon’s comments on a scandalous development project in southern Seoul.

The Seoul government approved the Pi-City project in 2009 to build a logistics complex, retail and business facilities on a 99,000-square-meter site in southern Seoul. However, it was eventually halted due to allegations of various violations. In a televised debate before the by-election, Oh Se-hoon said the Pi-City case had nothing to do with him. But a group of civic activists filed a complaint because relevant discussions on urban planning and construction were allegedly held during his administration.

The metropolitan government issued a statement criticizing the police raid as “excessive and politically oriented: the police could have confirmed the truth by simply investigating, but the mayor’s office was searched as if the mayor had committed a huge criminal act.”

Such a baseless attempt, if not to sink the new mayor, then to tarnish his reputation, makes one look at what Oh Se-hoon has done in his position since taking over in April.
Coming from a relatively poor family, Oh Se-hoon passed the national bar exam in 1984. He first hit the headlines in 1993 after successfully handling a class-action lawsuit surrounding a developer’s violation of tenants’ rights in Incheon. He later entered politics, serving as mayor of Seoul from 2006 to 2011, and won a landslide victory over the ruling Democratic Party candidate in the April 7 mayoral by-election.

On his first day on the job, Oh Se-hoon said, “From today, Seoul City will move forward again. Although I have only about one year after winning the by-election, I’ll do my best to complement what Seoul lacked, and the changes will be possible through your support.”

On April 13, Oh Se-hoon formally asked the government to change social distancing measures and change the mindset in efforts to curb the spread of COVID-19 because the self-employed and other small traders have long been struggling and to adjust the pace of property ownership tax increases.

On April 20, Oh Sae-hoon said officials involved in sex crimes would be fired immediately. Under the past mayor, the mayor’s office showed leniency, but now sex offenders will not be given a second chance and will be fired as soon as their misconduct is confirmed.

Western experts noted that Oh Se-hoon supported the proposal to co-host the Olympics with Pyongyang in 2032, even though the International Olympic Committee (IOC) had already chosen Brisbane. The Conservative party is pessimistic about inter-Korean cooperation.

An internal audience discussed the decision to ban alcohol consumption in public places: local authorities can now regulate or ban alcohol consumption in places such as parks, subways, bus stops, educational and health facilities. Violators can be fined up to 100,000 won ($88).

On July 20, an ordinance went into effect that allows the use of unmanned vehicles for passenger transportation.

In August 2021, Oh Se-hoon spoke out as harshly as the government did against the idea of right-wing conservative forces grouping around Pastor Jeon Kwang-hoon to hold mass demonstrations on the national holiday of October 15. The reason is clear - the high risk of a spike in infections.

Of course, there’s plenty of disagreement between Oh Se-hoon and Moon. Real estate issues are particularly striking: while the central government focuses on public rental housing, Oh Se-hoon is looking to boost private redevelopment and redevelopment so that 240,000 new apartments can be built by 2025.

The Seoul Metropolitan Council does not cooperate much with Oh Se-hoon either because the ruling party dominates it: 101 of the 110 council seats; moreover, the council chairman wrote an unusual letter to all Seoul metropolitan government officials, noting that the new mayor’s term is one year and three months. Citizens probably want stable governance in Seoul, not a sudden change. This sounds like a signal that city government employees don’t have to follow the new mayor’s instructions in good faith.

In the meantime, the council has black-balled the mayor’s nominee to head the city’s housing corporation. For a good reason, though: during the hearing, she did not present specific policy options to increase the supply of public housing and help control rising housing prices. Controversy is brewing over the Seoul mayor’s recent hiring of a conservative Youtuber as his new public relations secretary. The young man in his twenties was known for uploading videos criticizing Moon Jae-in and was embroiled in controversy after dropping the honorific title of president and calling him “Mr. Moon” instead. The main point of the criticism is that the position requires at least some public service experience, and that the mayor seemingly overlooked the importance of political neutrality which is a must for a public relations person. On the other hand, some argue that no special qualifications are actually required for the job, and the former mayor Park Won-soon, who belonged to the Democratic Party of Korea (DPK), hired many liberal figures for key positions in his office.

Another issue has surfaced over selecting a new landfill for the city’s garbage - Seoul’s garbage was previously “taken over” by Incheon, a port city west of the capital. However, it was announced in November 2020 that the service would end in August 2025, when its landfill reaches its capacity limit.

As can be seen, over time, Oh Se-hoon has shown himself to be a competent politician. He did not indiscriminately cancel all the projects of the Democrats just for the sake of the logic of factional struggle. He did not make communication mistakes like some presidential candidates, and he did not tarnish himself with any pipe dream projects or scandals. The welfare of the citizens is more important to him than the ambitions of a politician. But perhaps that’s why the Blue House will try to bring down one of the few sane right-wing politicians. It is much more
convenient to go to war with the odious and unintelligent.

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