A Chronicle of the Pre-election Race in ROK: Candidates and their Family Problems

One of the most common tactics in Korean politics since the Middle Ages has been to smear a family member. It is understood that political leaders cannot control their relatives and fail to be aware of their bad transgressions. This means that they could be done with his knowledge, or at least cast a shadow on his reputation as a worthy father, husband, boss, etc. It doesn’t matter how severe the offense is or when it was committed. At the same time, at several events, a presidential candidate must appear with his spouse, who, of course, must be above suspicion.

In the 2021-2022 pre-election campaign, some parties actively used this method because the relatives of both Lee Jae Myung and Yoon Suk-yeol were not without sin.

Let’s start with Yoon Suk-yeol, who got enough on this. We have already written about digging up on his wife and mother-in-law. On December 23, 2021, Ms Choi was sentenced to one year in prison for forging a financial document used in a past deal for land purchase in Seongnam from April 2013 to October in the same year. Earlier, in July 2021, she was also convicted in a separate case in July of establishing a medical foundation and opening a long-term care hospital for senior citizens in February 2013, despite having no medical qualifications. She was released on bail in September.
But it didn’t work with his wife at the start. On December 6, the Prosecutor’s Office of South Korea removed from Yoon Suk-yeol’s wife, Kim Keon-hee, part of the charges regarding possible involvement in the corruption scandal around Deutsche Motors due to lack of evidence.

On December 14, Kim Keon-hee denied allegations in a media interview that she faked her resume to get a college teaching position. Yoon’s campaign camp also denied this report in a press release, saying that Kim had mixed up her years with the association, but the work experience is real.

Under pressure from journalists who provided evidence of inconsistencies in her resume, Kim Hong-hee partially admitted “a mistake” and explained her actions by “a desire to distinguish her resume from others”. But she immediately provoked a new scandal with her dissatisfaction with such a thorough investigation of her distant past, saying that “she is not a civil servant” to be so meticulously dug, plus all this happened before she married Yoon.

Of course, such an apology was unacceptable.

Soon, a group of MPs from the ruling Democratic Party filed new allegations that Kim had lied on another resume that she submitted in 2013 as part of a job application at Anyang University, where she became an Associate Professor of Humanities in 2013 and worked until 2015. She allegedly claimed to have won the main prize in the animation category of the 2004 Korea Content Awards. Still, after being screened by the ministry of culture that accepted the awards, Kim’s name was not listed on any awards, let alone the grand prize.

On December 26, Kim Keon-hee again apologized for her past actions interfering with her husband’s campaign. “All was my fault and carelessness. Please forgive me.”

However, on December 28, the Seoul Police Department accepted complaints filed by civil group representatives alleging that Kim falsified her credentials in her resume submitted for her past teaching positions at several universities, including Suwon Women's University and Kookmin University.

Yoon noted that he and his wife feel remorse because they do not live up to society’s expectations. Nevertheless, he considers it premature to offer an official apology.

Ten days after the first news appeared, December 17, 2021, Yoon nevertheless apologized for causing public concern. The statement came after Kim Chong-in, head of Yoon’s election committee, referred to the need for him to make a clear apology for his wife’s misconduct as soon as possible. In the end, Yoon said that he would humbly listen to the voices of the people ahead of the presidential elections. He said he knew that her apology was not enough but stressed that it was done sincerely. He stated that he does not oppose having a third-party institution verify Kim's master's degree papers over allegations of plagiarism. He added he has no plan to force his wife to join his campaigning activity publicly, saying the matter is up to his wife.

In addition, Yoon said that he and his wife did not have a plan for Kim to campaign from the start. The president’s wife is just a member of the family, and if elected, he will abolish the organization responsible for supporting the first lady’s activities.

Lee Jae Myung also had a scandal. At first, conservative journalists trumpeted that Lee’s wife’s injury resulted from beating by her husband. Then they stalked her, so on November 16, the police were forced to issue an official warning to them.

The allegations were reported by the Chosun Ilbo, December 16, which stated that a person believed to be Lee's 29-year-old son had been gambling illegally, based on some 200 posts uploaded on an online poker community from January 2019 to July 2020. The person also wrote about his visit to offline gambling sites around Seoul, calling himself a “habitual gambler.” Note that formally illegal gambling is prohibited in the country.

Lee Jae Myung immediately apologized.

Both scandals could damage the candidates’ image, as they each press for fairness and fairness, but Yoon has been more criticized, even in the conservative media, for “belated apologies.” As noted by The Korea Times, “Fairness should be held dear.” As the wife of a leading presidential candidate, Kim was supposed to candidly admit her faults and take due responsibility If not, Yoon will fail to regain public support. Kim is facing lawsuits filed by many educational institutes for her falsified credentials. Investigators should get to the bottom of her case regardless of her apology. Presidential candidates should pay more heed to potential misdeeds by their family members. Earlier, Lee Jae-myung, the presidential candidate of the ruling Democratic Party of Korea (DPK), also faced allegations that
his son was involved in illegal gambling. Yet, he managed to mitigate the repercussion by making a prompt apology, vowing not to have his son repeat such misconduct.”

However, another article in the same newspaper noted that it may have worked in the era of patriarchal families. Still, today illegal behavior related to family members should be considered obvious shortcomings of candidates only if they were direct accomplices in this activity.”

The scale of digging for dirt has already attracted attention. The author stumbles upon a series of articles where both are recommended to refrain from becoming personalities and finally criticize each other’s political views. After all, such a hobby for compromising materials can have undesirable consequences in the form of a poor rating for both candidates and a possible decrease in turnout.

But how can one criticize political views if one candidate is a populist, partially making money on the hype, and the other ended up in the conservatives only because there is no third force in the logic of the Korean political struggle? As a result, both candidates make harsh statements and try to “harvest crops from someone else’s plot,” as we read in the following materials about the presidential race in South Korea.

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