A Chronicle of the Pre-election Race in ROK: Lee Jae-myung’s Entanglements

With just a month or so until the presidential elections in South Korea, this bulletin in our series of “dispatches from the front” focuses on Lee Jae-myung, the candidate from the ruling Democratic Party.

The partnership with Lee Nak-yon, and the changing of the guard at the electoral committee

In order to avoid being associated with Moon Jae-in’s legacy, Lee Jae-myung sees it as essential to “carry out a thorough overhaul and create a completely new party.” But things do not always work out as one hopes, and the conduct of any high-profile politician will always be scrutinized in detail for any hints of scandal. A recent example was the unfortunate case of Cho Dong-youn, co-chairperson of the Democratic Party election campaign committee. A young working mother with experience in the military and space sectors, a major in the South Korean army and a professor of military sciences with a Master’s degree in State Administration, she was the first committee member from outside the ranks of the Party elite. But as soon as her appointment was announced a conservative-leaning YouTube channel claimed that one of her two children from her previous marriage was born from an extra-marital affair. As a result, on December 3, just a few days after her appointment, she decided to resign in order to protect
On December 23, 2021 Lee Jae-myung officially joined forces with his main rival, former Prime Minister and later leader of the Democratic Party Lee Nak-yon, who was knocked out of the leadership race following his defeat in the primaries, although he had earlier accepted the position of adviser to Lee Jae-myung’s campaign. The goal of the alliance was to patch up the division within the party and win the support of voters in the south-western region of Honam, where Lee Nak-yon is a popular figure.

On January 24, after Yoon Suk-yeol again overtook Lee Nak-yon in the opinion polls, seven key supporters of Lee Jae-myung, including Democratic Party Secretary General Kim Young-jin, declared that they would not accept posts in Lee Jae-myung’s government, as Moon Jae-in’s administration “has failed to root out the practice of rewarding those who played roles in past presidential elections with good government jobs. We, the so-called group of seven, will give up our privileges and will not take any nominative jobs in the Lee administration.”

On January 25, Song Young-gil, leader of the democratic Party, admitted that “the self-reflection, change and reform fell short of what was needed to soothe the anger, disappointment and wounds of the people.” He added that, in accordance with the recommendations of a parliamentary commission, the Democratic Party would take steps to swiftly expel the three deputies accused of misconduct. One of those three is Yoon Mee-hyang, about whom the author has written more than once in connection with the “comfort women business.” And, finally, the Democratic Party will call for a ban on any MP being elected in the same district for more than three consecutive terms.

On the subject of the need for reform, the Korea Times has pointed out that the Democratic Party is coming under increasing pressure to transfer power from the so-called Generation 586, politicians in their 50s and 60s, who participated in the pro-democracy movement of the 1980s, and were born in the 1960s. Irrespective of their political stances, they continue to make up the Party elite and, while paying lip service to progressive policies, in reality adhere to the principle that democracy means keeping absolute power in the hands of the Democratic Party.

Problems related to populism and mutually excluding promises

The conservative media accuse Lee Jae-myung of confusing voters by changing his positions on critical issues, with the excuse that this is “the people’s will.” This is a reference to his populist tendencies to say different things to different audiences and to ignore promises he has made in the past. For example, although he promised to introduce a tax on land ownership (up to 1% of the land value) and spend the money received to provide citizens with a minimal income, when opinion polls revealed that 55% of respondents opposed the tax he told local media organizations that he would not insist on this policy if the public were against it.

Similarly, faced by criticism, he has backed down on his proposals for quotas limiting the number of restaurants in certain regions, and for a four-day working week.

On November 23 Lee Jae-myung promised to introduce legislation guaranteeing places for workers’ representatives on companies’ boards of directors. But the next day he stated in a business forum that business should not be subject to control and regulation.

On the other hand, Lee Jae-myung is trying to distance himself from Moon Jae-in’s administration by criticizing the current government’s and politicians’ COVID-19 support policies and making capital out of the various scandals involving government insiders. He has also on more than one occasion apologized for his corruption allegations against Cho Kuk, a former justice minister and close aide to President Moon.

This has been interpreted as an attempt to win the support of centrist voters - although some of his initiatives look more like incursions into Conservative territory. For example, in December 2021 Lee Jae-myung was criticized for his contentious comments on Korea’s leadership during the military dictatorship. In a clear attempt to win the sympathies of local voters, during a visit to the conservative-leaning North Gyeongsang province Lee Jae-myung praised former dictator Chun Doo-hwan for his economic achievements, and described Park Chung-hee, dictator during the 1960s and 1970s, as an “outstanding politician, despite his controversial reputation.”

Developments in the Seongnamgate scandal and other mysterious corpses

The most serious scandal threatening Lee Jae-myung’s presidential ambitions is the so-called Seongnamgate affair, which the author has already commented on more than once in previous articles. In short, Hwacheon Daeyu, a completely unknown company, was selected as a private-sector partner for the development of the Daejang-dong residential district in Seongnam, and made a huge profit, several thousand percent, from its involvement in this
lucrative project. A number of Lee Jae-myung’s associates were directly involved in this affair, and his critics claim that he could not have been unaware of what was happening, and may have been one of the main beneficiaries.

Then, on December 10, Yoo Han-gi, head of the Pocheon Urban Corp., a regional development company, was found dead not far from his home. It has been speculated that he may have been in possession of potentially incriminating information connecting Lee Jae-myung with the corruption scheme. His suicide occurred the day before he was due to testify in court, and the prosecutor had already issued an order for his arrest.

In a further twist, on December 21 the police discovered the body of Kim Moon-ki, head of the Seongnam Development Corporation, who, it appears, may have played a key role in removing from the project agreement a clause allowing the municipal government to recover excessive profits from private investors. It was the removal of this clause, present in earlier drafts, that enabled Hwacheon Daeyu to make a profit of hundreds of millions of dollars from the project. It also looks as if Kim Moon-ki helped the developer win the project tender.

The death of these two key figures in the scandal has been a setback for the investigators, who are under increasing pressure to find evidence that Lee Jae-myung’s was deeply involved in the scheme.

Nevertheless, on January 18 the police arrested Choi Youn-kil, former speaker of the Seongnam city council who later served as a director of Hwacheon Daeyu. He is accused of helping to launch the lucrative construction project in return for a promised payment of 4 billion won ($3.3 million). He was a close associate of Lee Jae-myung when the latter stood for mayor of Seongnam in 2010.

And then there has been another suspicious death, not related to the Seongnamgate scandal. On January 11, a 55-year old man identified simply as Mr. Lee was found dead. He had earlier accused Lee Jae-myung of using money provided by another person (in effect, accepting a bribe) to pay his defense lawyer’s fees and costs in his 2018 case on alleged violations of election law.

The opposition immediately described this as an indirect murder, citing comments by members of the deceased’s family that he had been threatened by persons connected to the government party. But the police have declared that they have not found any evidence of foul play, and the forensic pathologist’s report states that he died of heart failure.

Goodbye Lee Jae-myung

Another problem for Lee Jae-myung is a 240-page book called Goodbye Lee Jae-myung, by one of his former associates, the lawyer Jang Young-ha. Among the accusations in the book is that Lee Jae-myung had links with organized crime when he served as mayor of Seongnam. The book also discusses his difficult relations with the family of his brother, who died of cancer in 2017 and accuses him of having used his position to have his brother confined to a psychiatric hospital. On January 18, Lee Jae-myung made a public apology, with tears in his eyes.

The Democratic Party has applied for an injunction prohibiting the sale of the book, which is currently the best selling title in a number of on-line retailers including Kyobo Books. The opposition, naturally, has promoted the book, recommending all voters to read it in order to understand the Democratic Party candidate better. However, on January 20 the Seoul Northern District Court rejected the application for the injunction, citing the public’s right to be informed and the freedom to express one’s opinions.

Let us now draw some conclusions.

Although Lee Jae-myung is not Moon Jae-in’s appointee, but rather the head of a separate government faction, his position is fairly secure. He has been able to brush some scandals under the carpet, while other scandals are not seen as fatal to his presidential bid. There is as yet no clear evidence linking him to any criminal case.

Nevertheless people are not happy. When the Democratic Party opened its on-line forum, it was immediately flooded with more than 1300 messages calling for the withdrawal of the Party’s candidate. Most of the messages called on the Party to replace him with another candidate - the most popular choice being Lee Nak-yon. “With all his failings, Lee Jae-myung is now a liability, and he is in no position to criticize the Conservative candidate.”

But Yoon Suk-yeol has just as many problems, which will be discussed in future articles.

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