A Chronicle of the Pre-election Race in ROK: Ahn Cheol-soo’s Game.

For only so long, the author did not pay attention to the third candidate, but now the time is ripe to talk about Ahn Cheol-soo. This is already the third election that this 59-year-old former doctor and software entrepreneur takes part in. In 2012, he ran for president as an independent candidate but dropped out of the race less than a month prior to the election day throwing his political weight behind Moon Jae-in, then-opposition candidate. Ahn Cheol-soo apparently believed that after landing within the same party he would capitalize on Moon’s failures and would gradually sideline him from leadership. However, after the opposition lost mid-term parliamentary elections in April 2014, he started to push for inner-party reforms, laying the blame on Moon for everything, after which Ahn Cheol-soo broke off and created The People Party in December 2015 — with not much success though, since he was sidelined Kim Dae-jung’s long-time allies. For a while, Ahn even resigned as a party leader; however, in the 2016 parliamentary elections, the People Party won 38 seats.

In 2017, Ahn ran again for president as a People Party candidate. For a while, he was even outpacing Moon Jae-in in polls, but failed in debates and came third mustering 21.41% of votes.

In February 2018, the People Party unified with the right-center Bareun Party dominated by such break-away former members of the main conservative party as Yoo Seung-min. But soon Ahn left the leadership (or he was dismissed), considering that former allies of Kim Dae-jung refused to unite with the right, breaking away and heading for the
Nonetheless, Ahn set sights on the post of Seoul mayor in June 2018, but he lost the election at which point in September 2018 he “took a time-out” and went abroad to “study.” He came back in 2020 just in time for January 5 when the conservatives led by Yoo Seung-min left again for “the main party.” At this point, Ahn initiated another crackdown on January 29, 2020, exuding his supporters from the Bareun Party to another People Party.

In the 2021 Seoul mayoral election, Ahn lost in public opinion polls and withdrew his candidacy. Then he was seeking to unify the People Party and the People Power Party with the idea that the conservatives, in the absence of dominant leaders, will nominate him as a common opposition candidate as “the only prominent and unbesmirched figure.”

Even when on November 2, 2021 Yoon Seok-yeol joined the People Power Party, Ahn said that political transition and ushering of a new era in the nation’s history would be possible only if the presidential candidate from the main opposition party agrees to nominate a single candidate, or, rather, abdicates in his favor. At the same time, as early as on November 3, Ahn Cheol-soo said that he was not interested in unifying the candidacies calling it an “impossible deal.”

Since late 2021 and early 2022, amidst the growing frustration with the two main candidates, Ahn’s polling numbers surged floating around a two-digit figure in January, which gave impetus to certain ambitions as the conservatives started to look upon him more favorably, with Kim Chong-in himself pointing out that “we should wait and see, but a coalition will be helpful to some extent.” On the other hand, Lee Jun-seok, the party’s leader, voiced strong objections against alliance with Ahn.

On January 11, 2022, Ahn gave up on the idea to consolidate with the People Power Party and to nominate a single presidential candidate. Moreover, on January 25 he dismissed Yoon Seok-yeol as unfit to be a nominee who had just capitalized on the incompetence of Moon Jae-in’s administration.

On February 6, 2022, Ahn Cheol-soo signaled once again that he would partake in the presidential race to the very end, thus refuting speculations about a single nominee.

At the same time, on February 13, 2022, Ahn Cheol-soo came up with an official proposal addressed to Yoon Seok-yeol to unite their nominations to secure a “landslide victory” over the ruling party. To choose the man in the driver’s seat, Ahn suggested to rely on public opinion polls, just the same way it used to be in 2021. He argued that the elections based on the poll would do justice for both candidates, their supporters and public, still unsure whom it should back up.

Indeed, such a strategy is typical for Ahn: he runs as a third candidate in terms of significance and then withdraws in favor of one of the two front-runners. This was the case when he abdicated in favor of Moon Jae-in at the previous elections; acting along the same lines, he joined the conservatives when the mayoral election was at stake. While not all Ahn’s supporters would welcome this merge, a single conservative candidate will have 7-8% more votes allowing him to prevail, although with a slight margin. Thus, Ahn may become that proverbial last straw to break the camel’s back.

However, in this case Ahn had a much more ambitious objective in mind, suggesting a referendum at which voters will decide themselves who is more dear to their heart — Ahn or Yoon. At the same time, Ahn had two factors in back pocket that would allow him to dream of victory.

Firstly, both Lee and Yoon are reeling under the weight of controversies since both parties heavily relied on smear campaigns. Ahn stayed on the sidelines of this mud-slinging; for that reason he may count on the public chosing him as the least besmirched person. January polls (amidst all problems in Yoon’s camp) showed that if Yoon and Ahn form a coalition and choose the latter as a single candidate, he will overrun Lee with a score of 42.3 - 28.9%. If Yoon is the only candidate the margin will be only 34.4 - 33.6%. Moreover, 49.3% poll-takers distinguished him for his ethics and skills.

Secondly, an across-the-board public opinion poll is not equal to a vote taken inside the conservative party. All this paves the way to entanglements since Ahn can be supported by the conservatives that do not like Yoon and those representatives of the democratic party that are too aware of the fact the Yoon’s ascension to power will entail an attempted crackdown on the Moon’s government and his intimate circle.

The would-be merge has its own disadvantages. Firstly, Ahn does not have a feasible vision program either. As far as
Ahn’s talking points are concerned, his attempt to pose himself as a third force (neither democrats, nor conservatives have the right to rule South Korea in terms of morality and competency) meets the eye, as does his pledge to step down immediately after his rating falls below 50%. Ahn also announced his intent to change the Constitution and induce redistribution of powers and authority from the president to the prime-minister by allowing the former to stand for reelection, but cutting the term to 4 years. Apart from this, he slammed Moon Jae-in’s administration for destroying democracy and economy, mishandling COVID-19 vaccines and hypocrisy.

Secondly, what use does Yoon have for Ahn? Ahn has said that a single nomination will be the only way for any of the candidates to win the election and to showcase overwhelming public support for showing the door to the nation’s leadership and political transition, especially given that the ruling Democratic Party of Korea has a strong majority in the National Assembly. Even if an opposition candidate beats the ruling party candidate, it is highly likely that the president would have little power. But the problem of the parliament where the democrats have almost a supermajority remains REGARDLESS of which opposition candidate becomes president while three votes that can be offered by Ahn are not that important from this perspective.

Finally, for conservatives already struggling with factionalism Ahn and his ambitions are a huge pain in the neck. That is why Yoon said that he “positively views the proposal to unify candidacies in terms of the great cause of changing the government, but there is a disappointing consideration,” and instead of public opinion polls he suggested primary voting inside the People Power Party, bearing in mind that last time during massive ballot democratic supporters voted for his opponents whom they deemed to be more convenient adversaries. At the same time, some conservatives explicitly expressed hope that “candidate Ahn Cheol-soo would make a courageous decision.”

On February 9, Yoon Seok-yeol said that he would not engage in talks with a secondary candidate Ahn Cheol-soo on the unification of their candidacies, leaving a window of opportunity for a merge by a surprise deal.

On February 15, Ahn Cheol-soo urged Yoon Seok-yeol to respond to his candidacy unification proposal as soon as possible since this was a proposal addressed from one presidential candidate to the other.

Meanwhile, according to polls conducted in late February, shall Yoon and Ahn join their efforts, Yoon would beat Lee 43.1% to 36.2% while Ahn would prevail with only 38.5% against 33.1%.

Yoon Seok-yeol kept silence for a week, and on February 20 Ahn Cheol-soo publicly dismissed the idea of putting forward a single candidate. Ahn said that he intends to “follow his own way,” blaming Yoon Seok-yeol and the People Power Party for the coalition breakdown.

Although Ahn Cheol-soo’s ambitious plan faltered, the author still believes that this “bird of passage” might throw a curve ball. If Ahn comes to an arrangement with Lee, the democrats may be the ones who are in for a victory with a slight margin, although there is no much time left, with a front-runner still unknown while anything can happen.

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