South Korea's Future Domestic Policy: is Ahn Cheol-soo losing his party?

In the previous article on this topic we already touched upon the problem that Ahn Cheol-soo faced when he tried to take on the role of a third player that could occupy an advantageous position between the right and left wing. However, it turned out that the success of his party (38 seats in the parliament) wasn't his personal victory and, in fact, the electoral base and the composition of the party insiders are not centrists, but those from the old guard of Kim Dae-jung and natives of Jeolla province.

However, after the elections in April, Ahn suffered a fresh blow, which was highly unpleasant. For, the more a person dresses himself up as a moral crusader or a fighter against corruption, the more sensitive the audience reacts to his revelation: when all those around you are whiter than white, any slip-up stands out like a beacon.

Furthermore, the Seoul prosecutor's office accused the People's Party of coercing a number of advertising companies to provide services that totalled 200 thousand dollars in the run-up to the parliamentary elections. Moreover, in accordance with South Korean legislation, the state partially reimburses election campaign expenses to the parties that were elected in the National Assembly. Thus, the People's Party was given approximately 100 thousand dollars for hiring advertising companies that actually worked for the party for free.

The main player was 29-year old Kim Su-min, the youngest deputy both in the People's Party and in the Parliament. She was responsible for the party's PR campaign and, according to the prosecutor, may have obtained 178 million won (US$153,000) through false contracts. Furthermore, questions were raised concerning the fact that she had reached a high position in the party list that had allowed her to become a member of the parliament on a proportional basis.

On June 10, 2016, Ahn announced that he would take every necessary step and hoped that the investigation would be conducted fairly. However, after the session of the party's Supreme Council, on June 29, the co-leaders of the People's Party, Ahn Cheol-soo and Chun Jung-bae, resigned.

During the briefing, Ahn Cheol-soo announced that he should personally take on full political responsibility for this scandal. His colleague expressed the same. The vacuum of power will be covered by a temporary committee. Park Jie-won, a leader of the parliamentary faction, was appointed the head of the party, who will work on seeking ways to settle this crisis.

But who takes the top spot? Park Jie-won, the former secretary to Kim Dae-jung, who went on to become his chief of staff. Towards the end of Kim's presidency, Park was accused of embezzling 15 billion won from Hyundai, which were then sent through its channels to North Korea as a secret payment for holding the Pyongyang Summit 2000.

The "Case of the Corrupt Summit" was a huge scandal but it was difficult to find and clear and damning proof. Right-wingers relied on the fact that the scandal that involved one of Kim Dae-jung's closest friends and supporters would play its role in "sinking" his candidate for the presidential elections. This wasn't the case. However, having come to power, Roh Moo-hyun used this story to edge out Kim Dae-jung's "old guard" of power. Thus, he was able to kill two birds with one stone: on the one hand, he got rid of internal opposition within the party, and on the other, he tossed
Park's accusation followed in an interesting way. The court recognised that Park had committed the act of organising the money transfer to the North in the interests of the state that had been set out by the administration of Kim Dae-jung. However, although lawyers maintained that the accusation had been built on circumstantial evidence and the testimony of unreliable witnesses, Park was sentenced to 12 years imprisonment (the prosecutor had demanded 20 years). According to the court, there was no possibility of a lesser sentence because the accused did not show any signs of remorse and maintained his innocence. All the other defendants, both government officials and representatives of Hyundai got off with suspended sentences.

Therefore, it can be said that the People's Party is slipping further under the control of the "Jeolla faction". If that continues any further, Ahn's supporters will be completely cut off from the party's leadership. Should this occur, the name of the People's Party will have a rather different meaning.

What about Ahn Cheol-soo himself? Although the author considered him a populist, many people in South Korea associated with him hope for a transition to a "fundamentally new political struggle", but so far it has turned out that this third player does not particularly differ from the others. If the scandal continues, at most it may strike a blow to the entire party, at least - Ahn's hopes of successfully taking part in the 2017 presidential elections.

Meanwhile, the political battle rolls on, and conservatives are once again taking control of the Parliament: exactly how - find out in the next article of this series.

Konstantin Asmolov, Ph.D. in History, Leading Research Fellow at the Center for Korean Studies of the Institute of Far Eastern Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, exclusively for the online magazine "New Eastern Outlook."