



IVAN ALLEN COLLEGE
THE SAM NUNN SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL STRATEGY, TECHNOLOGY, AND POLICY

Choice of a Lesser Evil: The 2007 Korean Presidential Elections

Thursday, November 29, 2007

On November 29, 2007 in the Gordy Room at Georgia Tech's Wardlaw Theater, **Dr. Lee Nae Young**, political science professor and Director of the Asiatic Research Center at Korea University, spoke regarding the South Korean presidential elections due to take place on December 19, 2007. Dr. Lee has served as the Director of the Center for Public Opinion Research at the East Asia Institute, an Executive Board Member of the Korean Political Science Association, a Research fellow at the Sejong Institute, and a member of the Presidential Policy Planning Committee in South Korea. As an expert on Korean and Comparative Politics, Electoral Studies, and the East Asian Political Economy, Dr. Lee has coauthored and edited various books and published numerous articles in international and Korean scholarly journals.

In his speech at Georgia Tech, Dr. Lee examined the following three items: 1) the recent progress and current status of the Korean Presidential elections, 2) why Lee Myung Bak still leads the presidential race despite the scandals and doubt regarding his moral qualifications, and 3) who has the best chances of becoming the next South Korean President. Dr. Lee also discussed the candidates running for President, including the three front-runners: Lee Myung Bak (GNP – conservative), Chung Dong-Young (UNDP – progressive), and Chung Dong Young (independent – conservative) – who recently entered the race. Dr. Lee noted that the GNP (the opposition party) and its candidate, Lee Myung Bak, have dominated this race up until early November. At that time it was “very clear” that Lee was going to easily win the presidential race. Since early November there has been an “interesting and volatile” competition between the candidates for President.

Following the event in the Wardlaw Theater, Dr. Lee gave his speech again to Dr. Kim Tae Hyun's Korean Foreign Policy class at Georgia Tech. Included in this private presentation was a question & answer session with the undergraduate and graduate students taking the class. Below is a summary of this session.

Question & Answer with Georgia Tech Students

Question: How does the entrance of Lee Hoi Chang into the South Korean presidential race affect Lee Myung Bak's position on the ideological scale (liberal → conservative)?

What has changed has been South Korean domestic support for Lee Myung Bak due to Lee Hoi Chang's ultra-conservative stance on issues ranging from North Korea to the ROK economy. This is of great concern to the younger South Korean generations and liberals, and has driven these groups toward greater support for Lee Myung Bak.

Question: Former Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi was good for domestic Japanese politics, but had trouble in the international arena because of his nationalistic views (example: Yasukuni Shrine visits). What about Lee Myung Bak?

Lee Myung Bak is neither a nationalist nor an ideologue. He is very much a practical politician. Lee will be very realistic in his foreign policy and international dealings, including issues involving North Korea and Japan. Lee Myung Bak will mix in a more stick & carrot approach toward North Korea and will be closer to U.S. policy toward the DPRK. This foreign policy approach by Lee will mean the U.S.-ROK alliance will be in a “much better shape.”

Question: What has ROK President Roh Moo Hyun’s role been in this presidential election? How has he affected the race, especially with his recent moves regarding North Korea?

In the 2002 presidential race, candidate Chung Dong Young initiated the Kaesong Industrial Park project. This was seen by the South Korean public at the time as giving a boost to Chung’s candidacy, but it did not. President Roh’s 2007 peace talks’ initiatives are unrealistic for the Bush administration to accept. The same goes for the South Korean public. However, President Roh continues to push for peace talks. He does so, not for the elections, but in a genuine effort to help affect peace on the Korean Peninsula “in his own way.” The North Korean issue is not a major campaign issue in 2007 as it was in 2002. Chung Dong Young has tried to make it an issue, but has failed. The current presidential elections are focused on scandals and corruption, in part because these are issues that are easier to understand than the North Korea nuclear crisis.

Question: What are the chances that the next South Korean President will end the Sunshine Policy of engagement toward North Korea?

Even Chung Dong Young will initiate some engagement with North Korea. Pressing a military approach toward North Korea is a dangerous move right now – some degree of negotiation will be continued. The balance of a stick & carrot approach is the real issue. War scenarios with North Korea are unlikely. The main concern is a possible collapse of North Korea. This is why there have been so many attempts at engagement with North Korea, and why engagement will continue. The collapse scenario is also why attempts will continue to open North Korea’s markets and economy.

Question: What are the other issues that separate the liberal and conservative candidates in the South Korean presidential elections?

While Lee Myung Bak presses for fewer taxes, Chung Dong Young has not expressed an opinion on this issue. Lee has been campaigning on a position of deregulation of the South Korean educational system, while the liberal candidates want to maintain the current public school system. Lee Myung Bak is in favor of the FTA agreement with the U.S. Chung Dong Young is opposed to the KORUS FTA and has a more protectionist economic policy.