코로나와 선거

COVID-19 and the New Normal for Future Elections

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1. Introduction

Koreans traditionally believe that natural disasters occur because the lords are immoral. In particular, deaths resulting from the emergence and spread of infectious diseases are interpreted as punishment dealt by the gods; thus, kings from centuries past wore funeral costumes, fasted, made sacrifices, and asked for forgiveness when plagues erupted. Even today, this idea is prominent in South Korea. COVID-19 broke out while the general (parliamentary) election was scheduled for April, giving the opposition party a golden opportunity. They firmly believed that there are 40 million constituents waiting to judge the government, like god to punish the lords.

The basic principles of the South Korean government's response to COVID-19 are transparency, openness, and democracy. The government has attempted to minimize all restrictions on citizens through transparent public disclosure of all information and maintaining the borderline without closure. However, by the third week of February, a massive group infection based out of religious facilities erupted, and the outbreak soon spiraled out of control. As the number of patients gradually increased, the Korea Center for Disease Control and Prevention declared these outbreaks a Public Health Emergency and raised the national crisis warning level to "serious (red)."[1].

COVID-19 is now a part of daily political life, and evaluating whether the government is responding appropriately to COVID-19 has become the biggest issue of the South Korean election. The opposition party and conservative media have alleged that the government failed to prohibit COVID-19 because it did not implement a strong containment policy by banning Chinese entry. In their eyes, the election is a judgment on the government; moreover, such media outlets had predicted that the ruling party would receive far fewer votes in the 2020 General Election.

2. Proceeding with or postponing the General Election?

Alongside concerns about infection, public opinion on conducting the election has been heated, and various predictions have been made about COVID-19's potential impact on the results. Generally, the ruling party is the most frequently cited object of responsibility for disasters; if the government's disaster response is inappropriate, anger may spread rapidly throughout the population [2]. As the number of COVID-19 patients increased, the president's approval rating declined (Figure 1). The opposition party began criticizing the government's COVID-19 response more intensely, lowering the ruling party's approval rating. As a result, some ruling party figures suggested delaying elections. However, the Korean public believes that COVID-19 should not delay any democratic elections; therefore, the election proceeded as scheduled.

3. Preparation for the General Election

Due to concerns about COVID-19 infection, elections in at least 47 other countries, will be or have been postponed. Other countries such as the United States and New Zealand are still debating whether to hold their elections [3]. Therefore, South Korea's election has caught the world's attention, with focus on how Korea handled the problems of having the first election in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The South Korean Government took particular precautions to guarantee voter safety on election day by requiring all voters to wear a mask to vote and to stand at 1 m intervals while queuing to enter the polling place. Moreover, voters displaying a body temperature of $>99.5^{\circ}\text{F}$ ($>37.5^{\circ}\text{C}$) were required to vote at separate polling places, and plastic gloves were distributed to voters to ensure that there would be no bare-hand contact with ballots or ballot boxes. Individuals who had been recently quarantined or exposed to the COVID-19 could vote at specified times to prevent them from intermingling with uninfected people. COVID-19 patients voted by mail or at the preliminary polling place on April 10th and 11th.

4. God's anger turns into constituents' blessing

The incidence rate in Korea has decreased, and public opinion has slowly begun to change; around the week in April when Korea's response was highly praised worldwide, the president's approval rating increased by 56%. On April 15, general election voter turnout reached 66.2%, the highest in 20 years. Finally, South Korea's ruling party won a historic landslide victory, garnering 180 of 300 National Assembly seats in a coalition with a small satellite party to form the largest majority since South Korea's transition to democracy in 1987.

The victory of South Korea's ruling party could be interpreted in various ways. During the outbreak, President Moon Jae-in was highly visible and mentioned extensively in the news for his role in leading the federal government. Meanwhile, the opposition party lost many opportunities for self-promotion. Additionally, in response to COVID-19, the ruling political party could have had an indirect policy promotion effect. Thanks to the advantages of the national health system revealed in the response to the outbreak of COVID-19, the ruling party was able to bring about an indirect health policy promotion effect, which had a strong influence on the increase in voter turnout.

5. COVID-19 and the new normal for future elections

COVID-19 will have a significant impact on future elections. First, the outbreak has revealed publicly the competence of a nation's government in a crisis. Voters' evaluation of their government's competence will be reflected in election results. Second, amid such a crisis, people ask, "What is a country?" and "Can this government protect me, my family, and our society?" Politicians will have to answer questions about the government's appropriate response. Lack of an appropriate answer to these questions will have a direct impact on elections. Third, interest in how to restructure the medical system will increase. Outbreaks of novel infectious diseases will occur periodically. How to prepare for these events will need to be addressed by future governments. The COVID-19 crisis made South Koreans believe that the country's universal health care system will protect them in a public health crisis far better than that of any other, and that belief returned as an approachable result of elections to the current government. The main issue of the 2022 presidential election will also be government preparation for new epidemics and other disasters. Healthcare, the healthcare system, and preparedness for natural disasters—unlike in previous South Korean elections—will become major electoral issues both within and outside the country.

<Figure 1> Changes in Presidential Approving Rates According to New Cases of COVID-19

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