

# **Fraud in South Korea's April 2020 Elections**

**It Probably Happened and is a Big Deal for the  
United States**

---

An Occasional Paper for the  
Center for Security Policy



**By Grant Newsham**

September 23, 2020

*South Korean elections get limited attention in the United States. But maybe they should get more. The April 2020 South Korean national election to select National Assembly (like the U.S. Congress) members resulted in an overwhelming victory for the party of incumbent President Moon Jae-in. This surprised many, if not most, observers. Concerned South Korean citizens raised immediate charges of election fraud.*

*The author researched the issue in considerable depth, including research in August 2020 in South Korea. This report outlines his findings, and most importantly, his conclusion that the April elections mostly likely were manipulated and that this is a matter of U.S. national security interest.*

South Korea's election to select National Assembly members on April 15, 2020 was rigged by President Moon Jae-in's administration. Or so a diverse group of South Korean citizens claim.

This is a serious charge. Even more so, if true. Not least for the threat it poses to South Korea's democracy and to the entire U.S.-South Korea alliance. But before dismissing this charge as sour grapes by the losing party and its candidates, it's worth considering the evidence, which does raise serious and credible concerns that the Moon administration working with China 'fixed' the election.

First, some context is important.

Despite occasional hiccups, one tends to assume the U.S.-South Korea relationship is solid. It is nearly 70 years old, was forged in blood during the Korean War, and is based on shared democratic and free-market values and a common perception of the North Korean threat. This includes a mutual commitment to defend against North Korean aggression and nuclear blackmail.

But nation-to-nation relationships – just like people-to-people ones – can change over time.

And while unpleasant for supporters of the U.S.-ROK alliance to contemplate, could we be seeing a quiet but systematic effort – led by a committed core of South Korean hardline leftists represented by Moon Jae-in and a coterie of long-time associates to turn the Republic of Korea into a one-party state? A further objective of this consolidation of power, so the theory goes, is to unify South

Korea with North Korea, and to align South Korea (and a unified Korea) with the People's Republic of China – with whom there is seen a 'common destiny.'

Although unstated, since a majority of South Koreans currently oppose the idea – as well as the idea of unifying with the North – the ultimate aim of Moon and associates is to delink South Korea from the United States and remove U.S. forces from the Korean peninsula.

Far-fetched? Maybe not. Especially given what is known about Moon and his associates' backgrounds and ideological positions. More than just leftists or 'socialists', some of Moon's closest advisors and current South Korean officials were associated with anti-American, pro-North Korea student groups – and have never renounced such ideas. Others have been implicated and charged with spying on North Korea's behalf.

Moon and South Korea's leftists have made considerable progress towards controlling the levers of governance and power in South Korea. This includes dominating the media, the judiciary, the intelligence service, the National Election Commission, and even putting the South Korean military on notice with the arrest of a four-star General three years ago on questionable abuse of power and corruption charges, for which he was eventually found not-guilty. The Moon administration has used libel laws, tax audits, and regulatory powers to rein in free speech and bring the media and other critics to heel.

Academia has mostly been aligned with South Korea's leftists for many years. The leftist faction and the Moon administration also use the aggressive, noisy Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) as a political weapon. This includes intimidating and cowing political rivals, and even some of Korea's main private companies – with Samsung currently being in the cross hairs as a potential obstacle to Moon and the leftists amassing power.

But Moon et al still needed the National Assembly. Until recently, South Korea's fractious and nominally conservative opposition, the United Future Party (UFP), could at least serve as a counterweight to the left and some of its leaders' more sinister objectives.

However, the April 15, 2020 South Korean election resulted in an overwhelming victory (180 out of 300 seats) for the ruling Democratic Party (DP) over the main opposition UFP. This majority is enough to pass any legislation the DP desires,

and peel off just three more votes in the National Assembly and revising the Constitution is possible.

The overwhelming election victory was a surprise to many, though not all, observers and has led to claims the vote was rigged.

137 lawsuits have been filed, covering nearly half of all voting districts and seeking to overturn the election results. 25 losing candidates are among the litigants. This is far and away more than the number of suits brought following any previous South Korean election. And usually those suits are just asking for a recount. These are seeking to overturn the election as being illegally run.

Despite the fraud allegations, surprising – even stunning – election outcomes do occur – as shown in the famous photograph of a beaming, victorious U.S. President Harry Truman holding a newspaper with the headline ‘Dewey Beats Truman.’ Even Donald Trump’s 2016 election victory was a rattling surprise for many people. With this in mind, this writer was inclined to consider the April 15, 2020 election outcome as just ‘one of those things’ that happens in a democracy.

So this writer’s inquiries began with a degree of skepticism mixed with curiosity to see if there was a case to be made for the election fraud claims – beyond the outcome simply being so surprising that some people assumed there must have been fraud.

Before long, however, one sensed that these were not just sore losers venting frustration. Rather, they came across as level-headed – and included individuals who are eminent in their professions and experts in the specific areas where they allege electoral fraud. It’s a mix of professors, lawyers, statisticians, computer programmers, data analysts, software and semiconductor engineers, politicians, journalists, and ‘regular’ citizens – including a former leftist who spent time on the run from South Korea’s military regime. Even a large number of academics (not exactly known as conservative by nature) have joined in.

Collecting evidence to make the case for ‘election rigging’ is obviously a challenge – no matter what country it is, not least since election rigging is intended to be hidden. In South Korea, gathering information is no easier given the DP’s heavy hand over government, bureaucracy, the media, and other instruments of power. And there is also the simple reluctance of people to

believe systematic election fraud can happen in a first-world democracy such as South Korea.

## THE ALLEGATIONS

So let's walk through the charges, viewing things like a prosecutor assessing if there is a case or not. The allegations that the Moon administration rigged the election are based on the following key assertions:

### *Digital / Electronic manipulation of the vote*

Suspicious focus on the Electronic Counting Machines (ECM's) used at the voting sites.

Experts claim the machines can be hacked or manipulated, to include via remote access. Chinese-made Huawei components are said to be in the machines and/or attached laptop computers. One expert's brief examination indicated the ECM's are, in fact, high-performance machines capable of far more than just sorting and counting ballots. Election officials allowed the expert's examination only after citizens blockaded a voting site in Gure City to prevent the ECM's from being removed.

A video exists of an ECM counting ballots. Blank ballots are being counted as Democratic Party votes and ballots with United Freedom Party votes are being counted as votes for the DP.

Another reported incident is that of an election observer at a voting site in Buyeo noticing an unbelievable vote count in favor of a widely unpopular DP candidate. The counting was stopped at the observer's insistence – and the machine turned off and restarted. When restarted, the vote was reversed in the UFP candidate's favor. The NEC says this didn't happen. However, a reporter from reputable Korean newspaper reportedly has the witness's statement.

South Korean-made voting machines and ballot counting machines are widely used overseas – and concerns have been raised about their reliability. Oddly enough for a national election body, the NEC founded an organization in 2011 known as A-WEB. Its ostensible purpose is to promote good election practices globally. But it also appears to be equally involved in flogging South Korean-made hardware.

### *National Election Commission (NEC) Server*

The NEC central server that connects to each polling site is another point of suspicion. The central server allegedly has firewalls manufactured by Huawei – the Chinese electronics/telecom company that is regarded as a surveillance arm of the Chinese Communist Party. The U.S. government is currently sanctioning Huawei and the company has been clearly implicated in large-scale, sophisticated hack of the Organization of African Unity Headquarters in Addis Ababa, and recently, the Papua New Guinea national computer center. A number of other leading democracies have removed or are on the verge of removing or banning Huawei products from their government and/or private telecommunications networks.

Additionally, the NEC central server was located at the NEC main office rather than the GCCC – Government Central Computer Center. As mentioned earlier, the NEC is considered to be under Moon administration or leftist influence, if not domination. And a top official is a close Moon ally, and was even imprisoned nearly 30 years earlier for spying on North Korea’s behalf.

### *QR Codes*

Unlike the ballots for the election day voting, ballots used for ‘early voting’ and ‘mail voting’ have QR codes imprinted. Experts consider QR codes to be vulnerable to manipulation – and it is particularly hard to detect manipulation as well. Indeed, the state of Colorado in the United States prohibits QR codes on ballots for these very reasons. Another concern with QR codes is the potential for discovering a voter’s identify via the QR code on the individual ballot.

### *Counterfeit ballots*

Photos and videos exist of boxes of bundled ballots that appear ‘crisp’ and ‘pristine’ and marked for the Democratic Party. Additionally, citizens found ballots in the NEC central headquarters trash – after following the trash disposal truck and ‘buying’ the trash at its destination. The NEC headquarters should not have had ballots in its possession. Its initial explanation did not add up, and ultimately it declared it had made a ‘mistake.’ Perhaps. But that doesn’t convince many doubters.

### *Ballot 'chain of custody' problems*

Photographic and testimonial evidence exists of 'chain of custody' flaws in the physical handling of ballots. These include the use of non-standard boxes for storing ballots – such as 'bakery' boxes and boxes with holes in them. Additionally, ballots were stored in gyms and other unsecured, unmonitored locations. Other instances include 'sealing tapes' that did not function properly and can be removed without evidence of tampering. Other examples exist of tampering with the ballot storage boxes.

Another detailed examination by a South Korean lawyer of the delivery logs for moving 'early' and 'mail-in' votes by ground transport indicates widespread anomalies after comparing 'time/distance' records for delivery that are physically impossible in terms of traveling a set distance in the time claimed. Also, the lawyer's review reveals delivery routes that crisscross the country to travel what should be a matter of just a few miles.

Beyond the time and distance problems, the review uncovered suspect documentation of ballot receipts. All in all, the review suggests that over 2 million votes cannot be adequately vouched for.

### *Statistically improbable voting patterns*

The unusual voting patterns raised suspicions with some observers who were inclined to accept the election outcome, even if they had supported losing candidates. These individuals include highly respected statistics experts – including a former president of the Korean Advanced Institute of Science and Technology – South Korea's MIT – who first tried to prove the NEC issued voting statistics were correct and not the result of human manipulation. He was unsuccessful and stated the results were 'artistic' and 'either God did it or it was rigged.'

One statistics expert, an Ivy League PhD, described the particular voting patterns as 'throwing a stone 1000 times and hitting the target each time.'

### *'Early' voting' versus 'election day' voting results*

The South Korean electoral system allows for 'early voting' which allows two days of voting four or five days before election day (ED) voting. Voters are allowed to vote 'early' at the polls. If the polling site is outside their registered district, they are issued a ballot, mark it for their chosen candidate, and put it into an envelope. The envelope is then mailed to their 'home' district for counting. Ballots from early voters voting in their 'home' district remain at the polling site.

Voters who do not vote 'early' vote on 'election' day. In this case, April 15, 2020.

Particular suspicions center on the curious statistical relationship between results from 'early' voting compared to 'election day' voting. There was notable symmetry as 'early' voting ran in DP favor while 'election' day voting was in UFP favor. Further suspicions were raised as early votes (counted after election day votes) came in to consistently tip close races in favor of Democratic Party candidates.

There were reportedly 40 districts where DP candidates got 20-30% more early votes than their opponents – and every election went against the opposition candidates and for the DP candidate.

In a case of suspicious symmetry, challengers point out that the DP got on average 12% more votes during early voting compared to election day voting. Meanwhile, UFP got on average 12% less votes during early voting than on election day. The difference between early voting and election day voting should normally be much closer – usually around 2-3% -- according to statisticians alleging manipulation.

Also, in three major districts in and around Seoul, the difference between candidates' total votes and the number of EV's they received was the result of multiplying by .39. The result was the same in each district for each candidate.

One mathematics expert claims to have discovered the algorithm used to allocate votes – and coined a phrase 'digital gerrymandering' to describe what he calls real-time digital manipulation. The expert alleges it was to allocate 'early' votes to districts where ruling party candidates needed votes to prevail based on how vote counts develop as election day votes are counted. The expert also claims to



have detected an ‘Easter egg’ hidden in the programming – allegedly by Chinese programmers showing off their work that reads: ‘follow the party.’

An outside observer, University of Michigan professor Walter Mebane, an election fraud expert with decades of experience reviewing the results of elections using statistical models, reviewed the results of the April 15<sup>th</sup> elections. He reviewed the results at least four times based on questions raised and other input received to include specific details of the ROK election system. And each time he came up with an estimate that 7-7.5% of the votes were ‘frauds’.

Professor Mebane noted that that alone doesn’t mean ‘illegality’, since there may be some other reason – such as an unusual number of people went to early voting for some reason. But Mebane stated that the South Korean election results were in the top 10% of the several hundred elections he has studied in terms of frauds.

## **SPECIALIZED EXPERTISE REQUIRED**

Assessing the allegations based on technical and statistical claims requires specialized expertise and is not something the laymen can do. However, the experts who have raised the electoral fraud charges have made their findings and calculations public – and are available to explain and defend their work. This challenge does not appear to have been taken up.

Not even the media – local or foreign – has shown much interest in examining, or having their own experts examine the April 15<sup>th</sup> election voting patterns.

Another data point that was bound to raise suspicions, is that the day after the election, a key DP election strategist posted on the internet that the results were exactly what he predicted. His posting notes that he had estimated the required number of votes needed to win by applying an “Early Voting correction value.” The post was removed after two hours although a screenshot exists. The meaning of the statement and the term ‘correction value’ has not been explained.

Adding to the suspicions are allegations that closed circuit TV (CCTV) cameras in early voting polling locations were covered up during the two-day early voting period for ‘personal privacy’ reasons. The cameras were reportedly not covered during election day voting – when there presumably was no less need for personal privacy protections.

Other claims include 37 districts where there were more votes than voters.

And a detailed examination of ‘voting speeds’ – the time it would take for reported numbers of voters in given polling locations to physically cast ballots produced odd results indicating very ‘fast’ voting. In one location, during a one-hour period votes appeared to have been cast every 1.7 seconds.

## **MISUSE OF BIG-DATA?**

The ruling party reportedly made use of so-called Big-Data prior to the election to gather a detailed understanding of the electoral landscape in South Korea. The Democratic Party signed deals with local governments and Korean telecom companies to obtain personal data. Besides the legality and ethics of an incumbent administration signing such deals with local governments and private (but government regulated) companies, it is alleged that the information received potentially violated South Korean personal privacy laws.

DP efforts to utilize Big Data might just be considered ‘doing one’s homework’ and good electioneering. But one observer noted it can also allow precise pre-vote estimates of how many votes will be needed in given districts to prevail – and how many ‘extra’ votes will be required.

Also raising concerns are claims Chinese companies, such as Tencent, were involved with the DP in the Big Data analysis efforts.

## **NO SMOKING GUN, BUT SUSPICIONS RAISED**

The aforementioned data points do not include a ‘smoking gun’ that conclusively proves election fraud. And incompetence and inefficiency in running an election do not automatically indicate fraud. But taking the information uncovered in totality ought to at least raise concerns for government, media, citizenry – and even democracies overseas – to include South Korea’s treaty ally, the United States.

Yet, there hasn’t been much interest inside or outside of South Korea in digging into the allegations.

## THE MOON ADMINISTRATION'S RESPONSE

Most notably, the official South Korean government response – or lack thereof – to the alleged election fraud does not exactly resolve many doubts. Indeed, a reasonable interpretation of the Moon administration's behavior is that it is hiding something.

Not surprisingly the Moon administration dismisses charges of election rigging as 'fake news' and 'conspiracy theories.' But like Sherlock Holmes's 'dog that didn't bark,' what the Moon administration is not doing is noteworthy.

Moon officials are not addressing and refuting the specific charges even though the allegations of manipulation via ECM's, other hardware, software, and QR codes as well as the suspicious statistical voting patterns are subject to scientific examination and repudiation (or even confirmation) using one's own experts.

The Moon administration might have ordered a thorough recount using paper ballots in several hotly contested districts in an attempt to allay suspicions. It has not. Of course, given allegations of huge numbers of fraudulent or counterfeit ballots, even a 'paper' recount may not be enough to resolve things.

But rather than answering or addressing the claims of fraud and manipulation, the Moon administration has instead brought charges of libel and interference with election process against journalists and at least one losing candidate who challenged what he claims is a suspicious election outcome.

Efforts to suppress opposition and critics of the Moon administration have been ongoing since President Moon took office in 2017 – and even before. These include intimidating the media and even one-man YouTube operations – that are threatened with sanctions under public broadcast laws, 'demonetized,' or suffering other forms of official harassment. This effort to stifle free speech should be of prime interest to foreign media, but they have ignored it.

As for the curious symmetry of the early voting results compared with election day voting results, the Moon administration claims that this was simply owing to more DP supporters going out for early voting than UFP supporters.

And as part of this argument, DP supporters have claimed that 'young people' (who are considered more likely to support the DP) went out in larger numbers.

Yet official statistics indicate that almost one-half of early voters were over 50 years old – and around 21% were over 60 years old. Older voters are believed to lean and vote conservative.

## **THE JUDICIARY’S RESPONSE**

Despite an unprecedented number of cases being brought alleging election wrongdoing, the South Korean judiciary has not moved on them. This is perhaps unsurprising given that the judiciary is considered to be stacked with Moon’s appointees at Supreme Court and District Court levels. And it is notable that judicial officials sometimes serve as NEC officials as well.

## **THE NATIONAL ELECTION COMMISSION’S RESPONSE**

The NEC’s credibility is being directly attacked by the election rigging charges. Yet, its responses have not been compelling, and range from denials to half-hearted efforts at transparency. Concerns have also been raised that the NEC is not preserving evidence – documentary, electronic, and physical needed to address the charges of electoral fraud.

In response to claims of Huawei hardware in the electronic systems, the NEC stated: “...Chinese Huawei (equipment) is irrelevant.”

As for the charges of voting systems being hacked, the NEC said: “The early voting communication network is a dedicated network that connects the NEC central computer center with each early voting polling station, so there is no possibility that the data can be leaked and manipulated.”

These aren’t exactly compelling rebuttals given what is known of Huawei. They also suggest complacency, at best, given the skills of competent hackers at penetrating computer systems – no matter how well protected – as the U.S. Office of Personnel Management can attest from a 2013 Chinese cyber attack that stole information from millions of SF-86 forms which contain extremely personal information of Americans gathered in background checks for people seeking U.S. government security clearances, along with records of millions of people’s fingerprints.

Moreover, it is significant that the NEC has not allowed a thorough forensic examination of the hardware, software and QR codes used in the election balloting process.

When a citizen blockade prevented election officials from removing ECM machines from one polling place, they allowed the machines to be opened and examined for 'one minute'. And on one occasion when it allowed a limited display of an ECM, it did not show the actual laptop computer used with the ECM. Officials said that this didn't matter since laptops are all the same. The particular model is said to be specialty built for the NEC and assembled in China.

In another instance, the NEC reportedly allowed reporters to examine an ECM -- but they were careful to exclude hardware, software, and computer experts from this examination.

Many other claims still haven't been answered, to include the stacks of pristine ballots marked for the DP, the covered CCTV's at early voting locations, the improbably fast speeds at which votes were cast, or the questionable records of ballot deliveries by mail, nor how ballots were in NEC HQ possession or found 'out of district.'

The NEC's response should perhaps not be entirely surprising. One video clip exists of a poll watcher pointing out problems with the ballot counting process being warned by a local NEC official that they could be charged with obstruction.

And in another curious twist, the South Korean chairman of the NEC is always a sitting Supreme Court justice. If the justice retires, he/she also resigns as the head of the NEC. However, former Justice Kwon Soon-il reportedly continues as the head of the NEC even after he quietly retired from the Supreme Court on September 8, 2020 and without a retirement ceremony.

A South Korean lawyer commented "This has never happened before in South Korea – a retired justice continuing as the head of the NEC, and a justice retiring without a retirement ceremony."

## **THE SOUTH KOREAN MEDIA'S RESPONSE**

The mainstream South Korean media have not covered the election-rigging story with any enthusiasm. Reasons include the story being too complicated, fear of being legally charged or harassed by the Moon administration, and in some cases the media is simply sympathetic to the Moon administration

As a result, independent journalists – and ‘YouTubers’ have carried the story and continue digging. Skeptics and even the government deride them as mere ‘YouTubers’. But since the Moon administration is targeting and trying to silence these critics, one might assume the ‘YouTubers’ are onto something.

## **RESPONSE BY THE MAIN OPPOSITION PARTY – THE UNITED FUTURE PARTY**

The United Future Party was the first to declare that it would not challenge the election results. This, to some observers, suggested the charges of election fraud were unfounded since the party most affected was unwilling to pursue the claims.

However, keep in mind that at least 25 unsuccessful candidates did file charges. Also, the United Future Party is not quite what it seems. One observer referred to the UFP as ‘opportunists’ – rather than a principled, coherent conservative party. This is perhaps an excessive characterization, but it is not necessarily incorrect either.

Other observers point out that some of the top UFP leaders are considered to be too close to the DP and are tainted. Others point to a fear of ‘dying twice’ – trying to overturn the election and still losing again. And the UFP is also described as having a number of ‘status quo’ members who are satisfied with holding their own office and don’t wish to upset things.

Moreover, bringing a case of election rigging is hard work and risky – both politically and personally. The UFP’s reluctance to do so therefore may be less odd than it appears at first glance.

## CHINESE INVOLVEMENT

The April 15, 2020 election rigging allegations claim that China played a direct role in the election rigging scheme, to include technical aspects such as computer hacking and Big Data analysis. Huawei hardware in the election infrastructure also has been cited in these allegations.

From an operational perspective, with access to networks, equipment, and software, it is feasible China could have deployed the necessary technical expertise to manipulate vote totals or otherwise assist with rigging the April 2020 election. And with local cooperation in South Korea, this may have been easy to do. This is not conclusive evidence, of course, but given that China arguably had motivation, opportunity, access, and expertise, one should at least consider this possibility as plausible.

Chinese influence efforts in South Korea have been ongoing for many years with Chinese money spread throughout South Korea's economy and reputedly in the political world. China is South Korea's leading trade partner and Beijing has applied severe economic pressure on South Korea and South Korean companies operating in China on occasion to obtain political concessions.

China's response to South Korea's efforts to deploy the THAAD missile defense system in 2016 is a case in point. Economic pressure on the South Korean Lotte Group led to Lotte pulling out of China. Samsung faced similar pressure. And Beijing's cutting the flow of Chinese tourists to South Korea delivered a severe blow to the ROK economy.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the PRC even prevailed on President Moon to issue his 'three-no's' policy: 1) no additional THAAD deployments in South Korea; 2) no joining in a U.S.-led strategic missile defense system; and 3) no creation of a South Korea-U.S.-Japan trilateral military alliance.

This may not have been particularly difficult. Beijing seeks to split U.S. alliances – such as the South Korea-U.S. alliance – and wants to see U.S. forces leave the Korean peninsula. This aligns with Moon's and his close advisors' reputed objective of replacing South Korea's long-term alliance with the United States with a close relationship with China.



The April 15<sup>th</sup> election should be viewed in this light – as a step towards Moon’s (and China’s) ultimate objectives. The overwhelming victory for the DP gives Moon freedom to enact any legislation desired and to potentially change the constitution. And done right, obtain political control for the foreseeable future.

Critics warning of election fraud point out that long-time Moon colleague Yang Jang-chul, the head of the Democratic Party’s official think-tank, travelled to China in July 2019. While there, he signed a ‘policy cooperation agreement’ with a Chinese Communist Party-related organization. He also reportedly met with Chinese company Tencent during the visit.

In a curious move, the day after April 15<sup>th</sup> election, Yang announced he was fearful of the election result and was going to retire.

This is odd behavior. It’s hard to imagine a Republican or Democratic election strategist in the U.S. announcing something similar the day after engineering an overwhelming victory – rather than basking in his success.

Although the specifics vary, there is precedent for Chinese interference in foreign elections. Consider Chinese efforts to influence recent Taiwan election campaigns – to include cyber-based social media manipulation – along with widespread bribery and intimidation.

American intelligence services have warned recently of Chinese interference in the upcoming U.S. election.

## **WESTERN MYOPIA ABOUT ELECTION RIGGING IN SOUTH KOREA?**

Despite the circumstantial evidence uncovered by South Korean citizens working on their own, a rigged election in South Korea can still seem unthinkable. In a Third World country, perhaps, but not in the Republic of Korea. And a digitally-rigged election is even harder to imagine – not least given the sheer complexity of it all.

Yet this brusque dismissal is strangely myopic.

Consider how warnings about cyber-security are a standard part of one’s daily experience. We are warned to protect and change passwords, use firewall



software and update anti-virus software, be alert for phishing, etc. Indeed, one might conclude we are under constant cyber assault.

That may be so. Consider the many instances of sophisticated cyber attacks by government actors on government targets. As noted, U.S. officials warn of Chinese and other foreign computer hackers and specifically mention concerns of Chinese interference in the November 2020 U.S. presidential election.

Yet somehow the digital rigging of an election in South Korea is unthinkable? That doesn't make sense. Indeed, the payoff from ensuring an overwhelming DP victory in the April 15<sup>th</sup> election just might have been well worth the risk for Beijing – and the Moon administration.

## **WASHINGTON OUGHT TO TAKE THIS SERIOUSLY**

The U.S. government hopefully takes seriously the allegations of fraud in the South Korean election and considers it a warm-up for the U.S. election in November 2020. Even America's decentralized electoral system should not be considered invulnerable to manipulation by imaginative and criminal minds. And one only needs to target a handful of key closely contested districts to tip an election.

It would be appropriate for the U.S. government to quietly turn its smartest minds loose on the subject and either prove or disprove the allegations regarding the April 15<sup>th</sup> South Korea national elections. With an \$80 billion budget, cost should not be an issue for the U.S. intelligence community.

Nongovernment organizations (NGOs) interested in democratic governance and fair elections might also take up this challenge. And cyber security companies should be interested in a potential case study – and potential business development opportunities – of the technical possibilities for election fraud – and preventing them.

## THE FOREIGN MEDIA: MISSING IN ACTION

Scandals such as the alleged April 15<sup>th</sup> election rigging require sunlight to attract both official and public attention to either prove or refute the allegations. That is the role of the media. As noted, the South Korean media has not been interested.

But one marvels at the lack of interest by the foreign press. Instead, they are more likely to write about K-Pop Boy Bands or else write sympathetic pieces about Moon and his administration.

If a fair examination concludes there is nothing to the story, that's fine. But to not even try, especially when the people making the charges are willing to talk and explain the basis for their suspicions? That is baffling.

One recalls the media's years-long full-court press over claims of foreign interference in the U.S. 2016 election that put Donald Trump into office. But why is the foreign media not interested in investigating credible evidence of something very strange in the recent South Korean elections? Is this too much trouble to look into or have foreign media outlets written this off as fake news or conspiracy theories?

But even if the election rigging story is too difficult to investigate, consider the larger story beyond the April 15<sup>th</sup> election. That is: the possibility of a longtime U.S. ally in northeast Asia moving away from a consensual multiparty democracy towards a quasi- authoritarian (quasi-totalitarian according to some South Koreans) system and aligning itself with China.

Indeed, Moon and his administration's behavior bears a troubling resemblance to Turkey when Recep Tayyip Erdogan got started, or Venezuela under Hugo Chavez. Both Erdogan and Chavez took office via elections and gradually tightened control over their respective countries to the point that neither elections nor opposition political parties mattered much.

As that was happening, the U.S. foreign policy class mostly explained away what was happening. There was nothing to worry about. Erdogan and Chavez were just nationalists or populists looking to right social injustices and give their nations some breathing space.

Over time, however, Erdogan and Chavez got their hands on enough levels of power and snuffed out freedom. This has caused plenty of headaches for U.S. foreign and defense policy.

So maybe election fraud in South Korea is a story worth covering from this angle alone?

## IN CONCLUSION

This writer began his research as something of a skeptic about the election rigging charges. He is not any longer. And viewing things like a lawyer (which he is) proven by 'preponderance of the evidence' verdict is within reason.

Honest South Korean citizens are doing their best to preserve consensual government.

They need some help.

What would this help look like?

The U.S. Government's own quiet review – especially of the technical and statistical claims of election rigging in South Korea – would be a start (assuming this hasn't already been done.)

Also, a properly worded statement or two from Washington that it is aware of the issue and is always concerned about fair, honest elections – in the U.S. and elsewhere – would be helpful. This could both encourage South Korean citizens who are defending their democracy and also let any potential miscreants know they are being watched. Sometimes, knowing somebody is watching has a deterrent effect.

And finally, maybe the foreign media might show some interest in doing their jobs.

*Grant Newsham is a Senior Fellow with the Center for Security Policy. He also is a Research Fellow at the Japan Forum for Strategic Studies focusing on Asia/Pacific defense, political and economic matters. Newsham is a retired U.S. Marine Colonel and was the first US Marine Liaison Officer to the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force. He also served as reserve head of intelligence for Marine Forces Pacific, and was the U.S. Marine Attaché, US Embassy Tokyo on two occasions.*