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The Chaos in South Korean Politics in the First Half of 2025 and Its Consequences: The Establishment and Prospects of Lee Jae Myung's Progressive Regime

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1. The Fragility and Resilience of South Korean Democracy

South Korean politics demonstrated its fragility as well as resilience in the first half of 2025. President Yoon Suk Yeol invoked emergency martial law during the conflict with the opposition party, which holds a majority in the National Assembly, which was deemed unconstitutional and illegal; this eventually led to his impeachment. His dismissal occurred via a unanimous ruling by the Constitutional Court, indicating that the democratic mechanisms functioned despite institutional flaws. The South Korean presidential system has systemic conflicts due to the winner-takes-all system, with the divided National Assembly and the president's single term also being structural factors that cause political turmoil.

2. Opposing Conservative-Progressive Axes

South Korean politics is characterized by a polarization between the conservatives and progressives; however, the policy difference is not necessarily large. The main axes of conflict are as follows. First, the policy towards North Korea: conservatives view deterrence as important, while progressives emphasize engagement. Second, the economic policy: conservatives emphasize markets, while progressives emphasize redistribution and government intervention. Third, historical recognition: conservatives regard the 1948 founding of the country as legitimate, while the progressives consider the 1919 Provisional Government as the origin. Fourth, with regard to the rule of law and civic movements: conservatives prioritize the maintenance of order, while progressives value civic movements as elements that invigorate democracy. Fifth, on US-China relations: conservatives emphasize value-based alliances while progressives favor strategic ambiguity. Sixth, the policy towards Japan: conservatives promote Japan-US-South Korea trilateral security cooperation, while progressives consider historical issues significant; both sides recognize the importance of Japan-South Korea relations. Therefore, the conflicts are systematically intense rather than merely having differences of policy.

3. Downfall of Yoon Suk Yeol's Administration

President Yoon Suk Yeol, a former prosecutor general, had been a symbol of anti-corruption; however, his lack of political experience and numerous scandals concerning the First Lady led to the breakdown of his administration. The appointment of prosecutors, neglect of the economy, and confusion over the healthcare reform invited backlash from the public, and the ruling party was defeated in the 2024 National Assembly elections. His subsequent declaration of the election results as "fraudulent" and the imposition of emergency martial law directly caused his impeachment. President Yoon was arrested and detained for the crime of insurrection as a sitting President, which was unprecedented in Korean political history.

4. The Establishment and Characteristics of Lee Jae Myung's Administration

Lee Jae Myung rose from an extremely poor background to become a lawyer and subsequently a governor before he became president. The administration advocates "sovereignty of the people" and emphasizes "pragmatism." Having launched without a preparatory phase, its personnel system is characterized by a "parliamentary cabinet-style," featuring several members of the ruling party. On the policy front, it aims to restore people's livelihoods in the short term by issuing consumer coupons and medium-to-long-term strengthening of AI-related investments. It also prioritizes the correction of the real estate market and promoting equity investment. Although its approval ratings remain at 60%, hardliners against the opposition in the ruling party are gaining power, making the National Assembly's business difficult.

5. Foreign Policy and Challenges

In foreign affairs, the Lee Jae Myung administration upholds pragmatic diplomacy. It has partially resumed engagement with North Korea, such as the suspension of propaganda broadcasts; however, Pyongyang's response has been lukewarm. In US-China relations, it uses the regional concept of the Indo-Pacific, but refrains from adopting it as a strategic concept. Its involvement in the Taiwan emergency is also limited, and though it emphasizes the significance of US troop presence in South Korea, it has adopted a cautious attitude considering its economic relationship with China. Regarding Japan-Korea relations, it is pursuing pragmatic diplomacy that focuses on national interests, as is evident from the acceptance of third-party compensation related to forced labor judgments.

6. Conclusion

Korean politics in the first half of 2025 demonstrated institutional resilience, in that the impeachment and regime change functioned, while exposing the fragility of democracy. The Lee Jae Myung administration advocates “pragmatism,” seeking political stability and economic reconstruction, but faces challenges, including conflicts within and outside the ruling party, the US-China conflict, and uncertainties under the Trump administration. The prospect of Korean politics progressing hinges on how it can stabilize domestic politics and develop realistic diplomacy centered on Japan-US-South Korea relations, while facing the constraints of the international environment.

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