

South Korean politics

Snap back

SEOUL

Lee Jae-myung wins a presidential mandate—and inherits big challenges

SIX MONTHS of turmoil in South Korea are over. Lee Jae-myung of the liberal Democratic Party won a commanding victory, with 49.4% of the vote, in the snap presidential elections held on June 3rd to replace Yoon Suk Yeol, who was impeached for declaring martial law last December. Mr Lee's triumph serves as a resounding referendum on Mr Yoon's failed presidency: Mr Yoon's ally, Kim Moon-soo of the conservative People Power Party, came second with just 41.2%. Mr Lee will inherit a divided society and a battered economy, as well as big challenges from abroad, in particular Donald Trump, who has threatened South Korea with tariffs and called America's security commitments to its long-time ally into question.

Mr Lee's win caps an improbable journey. Born into poverty, he dropped out of school as a teenager to work in factories. He retrained as a lawyer, became a labour-rights activist, and, eventually, governor of South Korea's most populous province. In 2022 he narrowly lost the presidential elections to Mr Yoon. He survived after being stabbed in the neck last year by an extremist bent on preventing him from becoming president. Alleged election-law crimes threatened to derail his second presidential bid, but South Korean courts gave voters a chance to issue their own verdict.

In choosing Mr Lee, however, it is un-

clear exactly whom voters will get. Mr Lee made his name as a progressive populist. Yet in recent months he has recast himself as a sensible moderate. "Our guiding value is pragmatism," he told *The Economist* in January. He pledged to boost South Korea's benchmark stockmarket index and to make big investments in artificial intelligence. He endorsed South Korea's alliance with America and closer co-operation with Japan. Although he has called for stabilising relations with China, he pushed back against critics who label him pro-Chinese.

However Mr Lee decides to govern, he will enjoy a commanding position, with his party controlling a majority in parliament. His first priorities will be domestic. He has called for constitutional amendments to allow presidents to serve two four-year terms instead of a single five-year term and also to make it harder to impose martial law. He also promised a fiscal stimulus package to boost the struggling economy.

But the outside world will not give the new president much respite. Mr Trump imposed steep levies on industries in which South Korean firms excel, such as cars and steel, and threatened additional 25% tariffs on goods from South Korea (which has a free-trade agreement with America). A clash also looms over whether America should maintain its current troop levels on the Korean peninsula and continue to dedicate those forces to the defence of South Korea against its nuclear-armed northern neighbour—or divert them to broader regional goals, such as deterring China.

Mr Trump may also restart negotiations with North Korea's dictator, Kim Jong Un. On that matter, he and Mr Lee, an advocate of more engagement with the North, could find common cause. But if Mr Trump cuts a deal over Mr Lee's head, it could fuel

South Korean fears of abandonment. What's more, far-right allies of Mr Trump in America have embraced conspiracies spread by South Korea's far-right that Mr Lee is a communist and his election was fraudulent.

Other diplomatic challenges loom. Mr Lee's attitudes towards Japan will face an early litmus test when the two countries mark the 60th anniversary of their formal ties on June 22nd, an occasion that will bring the historical awkwardness in their relationship to the fore. In October South Korea will host an APEC summit, which will strain Mr Lee's ability to balance between America, China and Russia.

Many South Koreans will be happy to see an end to the Yoon era. But, even so, any sense of relief will be brief. As Mr Lee himself acknowledged in his inauguration speech on June 4th, "Unfortunately, we now face a complex web of overlapping crises in every sphere." ■

Wayfinding in India

You are... somewhere

MUMBAI

The price of a poor address system

A WOMAN TAKES her husband to a psychiatrist. "He's repeated our address so often he's lost his mind," she tells the doctor, as the man mumbles "A-42 Bhanushali Apartments..." So starts an advertisement for an app that promises to turn a "long, complex address" into something usable. Four years and millions of YouTube views later the problem persists. The huge growth of online shopping means that many urban Indians are repeating directions several times a day, often twice or three times per delivery.

Addresses in the West tend to follow a simple, hierarchical system: street name and number, district, city and post code. Indian addresses have those features and more: "next to SBI ATM"; "behind Ganesh Temple"; "near Minerva cinema". According to Santanu Bhattacharya, a former head of technology for Delhivery, a logistics firm, the median distance of "next to" in India is 80 metres. Around 30% of post-codes are incorrectly written.

The Department of Posts estimates that there are 750m households, businesses and other such discrete locations in India. A paper published by the department in 2021 admitted that "reaching the addressee by means of conventional addresses and landmarks is arduous". Apps such as Google Maps are useful, but only if addresses are accurate. Relying on someone



Can he provide stability?

Universities

Where is India's Ivy League?

Indians have been going abroad to study. Will this now change?

AROUND THE world, university leaders wonder if Donald Trump's crackdown on higher education might present them with an opportunity. America's president has frozen funding to universities he has ideological beef with; he has paused the visa interviews foreign students must attend if they wish to enroll this year. India has been losing academic talent to America for decades. At the famed Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), over 60% of the top 100 performers migrate abroad, mostly for America. Nearly a third of international students there are from India.

One estimate suggests that Mr Trump's policies might cause Indian students' applications to American universities to plummet by a quarter from this year to the next. This could be India's moment to reverse the brain drain. The problem is that its top colleges cannot yet compete in the global intellectual marketplace.

In theory, India's best universities have much going for them. Getting into Harvard is painless by comparison: admission rates for India's most prestigious institutions sometimes sink to 0.2%, against 3-9% for America's Ivy League. India is home to half the world's university-age population. Parents drum extreme ambition into their offspring and widespread English-language proficiency gives India an edge.

But so far, India has no entry in the top

100 of international league tables. By contrast China, having only broken into the global top 100 in the 2010s, now has the world's highest number in many rankings.

A big part of the problem is money. In the past decade, India has spent between 4.1% and 4.6% of its GDP on education. China's spending on it as a share of GDP may be roughly similar, but its GDP per person is five times that of India's. In the past decade China has splurged on lucrative research grants and one-off bonuses to lure back Chinese academics from the West. India lacks the rupees to match China's academic charm offensive.

Another issue is scholarly freedom. Indian academics teach from a government-dictated syllabus and endure oversight by the all-powerful University Grants Commission. An enterprising researcher needs clearance from central ministries when organising a conference with international colleagues and government permission when travelling abroad for work. Hiring at public universities is hostage to the whims of the ruling party of the day, since the government oversees top-level appointments.

Lately government meddling appears to be getting worse. Last year India ranked as "completely restricted" in the Academic Freedom Index by Scholars at Risk, an international network headquartered in New York, and V-Dem, a research group in Sweden; it was the lowest score since the 1940s. "Indian public universities are an unrivalled shit-show," says an Indian political scientist working in America. The syllabus he uses to teach Indian politics in America would "invite arrest" at home, he fears.

So far, ideas for reforming India's academia have not gained much traction. In 2017 an "Institutions of Eminence" programme was launched to scout for promis-



And now...to America

- ing universities and reward them with more autonomy and funds. But not enough suitable candidates could be found.

Similarly, in 2020 the government launched a new National Education Policy. It made bold recommendations to curb government oversight over boards and top appointments. But reform will be slow, not least because Indian states run by opposition parties are protesting against it. And the policy's proposal to switch from English to Hindi at central universities and

states with Hindi as their main language would hold back any institution trying to compete in a global academic system.

The rise of private universities could be India's best hope. Two decades ago there were fewer than 20 of them. Today that figure is over 400, or around a quarter of total academic enrolments in India. They have shiny campuses, mostly funded by big industrial groups. Many are snapping up foreign faculty members.

Saumen Chattopadhyay, an education

specialist at Jawaharlal Nehru University, believes the new crop of private universities will outperform public ones like his—precisely because they have more freedom. Exempted from the public sector's expansive affirmative-action programme and government say over appointments, vice-chancellors at private outfits can poach top talent as they see fit. If the government finds a way of supporting private universities from a respectful distance, India's league-table game might pick up. ■