



ELECTIONS AND COVID-19: LESSONS FROM THE 2020 SOUTH KOREAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

INTRODUCTION

Amid the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak in the world, South Korea officially known as the Republic of Korea held Legislative Elections for 300 seats on 15th April, 2020¹. Without a doubt, the COVID-19 pandemic has adversely impacted the activities of many countries, from health to business, sporting, religious, and even democratic activities. Due to contagious nature, the possibility of holding elections, which is the lifeblood and pivotal element of democracy², has been severely constrained. Even though a large and growing number of countries are postponing elections due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, some countries still intend to move forward with in-person voting – most with the introduction of several mitigating actions. One of these countries is South Korea³, which on the 15th April 2020 successfully conducted its parliamentary election amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

South Korea was one of the first countries to experience the outbreak of the virus outside of mainland China⁴ with its first cases reported in January 2020. 10,962 infections and 259 deaths⁵ later, South Korea was able to flatten the curve through aggressive tracing, testing and treatments⁶ and were able to conduct parliamentary elections.

With a population of 51, 263, 759 people⁷, the South East Asian country had 638 health centres which operates screening stations out of which 606 of those locations were equipped to collect samples on site⁸ that was carrying out tests round the clock with as many as 20,000 tests carried out in a day⁹. In addition to this, as early as March, South Korea enforced screening of entrants from China and Japan and also subjected passengers coming in from China, Italy, and Iran to quarantine¹⁰.

Despite the risks and challenges, the election was regarded by both experts and the media as very credible, having one of the highest voters' turnout since 1992¹¹. A lot of factors have been mentioned as the reasons for the success in the election, including the government's aggressive responses, strong and technologically-advanced healthcare system as well as an internet-savvy society that responded positively to the changes in the electoral process. Also, the country's National Election Commission (NEC) implemented some novel changes to the electoral process aimed at protecting the integrity of the elections as well as the health and safety of the citizens (political candidates and voters). Such that despite the pandemic, the election saw the highest turnout in 28 years (since 1992), with a 66.2% voter's turnout, and the ruling party winning 180 of the 300 seats in

what analysts saw as a nod of approval to the way the government handled the pandemic in South Korea¹²

This paper seeks to highlight the important lessons from the actions of key stakeholders particularly the Electoral Management Body (EMB), the National Election Commission, in ensuring the integrity of the electoral process and successful elections despite the obvious challenges of COVID-19. The paper considered the measures undertaken by the National Election Commission, and how these measures impacted the activities of stakeholders such as political parties, observers, and electorates as well as the impact on outcomes such as public health and safety of voters, voter turnout, political campaigns, and women representation and democratic values of inclusion, equality and justice.

THE SOUTH KOREAN ELECTORAL PROCESS AND SYSTEM

The history of the Korean electoral system dates back to 1948 when the government was founded with voting rights granted to any Korean citizen over 18¹³ who is registered in the electoral roll by the local government. There is concerted and strong push to ensure universal and equal suffrage for all citizens. Elections are held for the president of the Republic of Korea and the National Assembly.¹⁴ The amendments to the Public Official Election Act in 2009 enabled diaspora voting, whereby citizens of South Korea can vote during the presidential and national elections from any part of the world.

Since 1948, bar the period 1952-1961,¹⁵ the Republic of Korea has had a unicameral parliament (National Assembly, *kukhoe*) made up of 300 members.¹⁶ Representatives in the National Assembly are drawn from two groups of representatives. Votes are cast for 253 single-member district constituencies and 47 national-level seats are distributed proportionally among parties according to their share of votes¹⁷.

The constitutional term of office for the president is five years without re-election¹⁸ and four years for the National Assembly (no term limits)¹⁹. Candidates running for the National Assembly have to be up to 25 years old²⁰. While to be eligible for the presidency, the candidate must be at least 40 years old, have resided in the country for at least five years, and qualify as eligible members of the National Assembly²¹. In parliamentary elections, candidates may be recommended either by a political party or by electors (independent candidates)²². Independent candidates need the recommendation of 300-500 electors²³. Candidates in the national constituency can only run as party candidates on a party's list. Candidates must make a monetary deposit to the Korean National Election Commission²⁴. This money is reimbursed in full to a district constituency if he/she obtains at least 15% of the valid votes cast. However, only half the amount is reimbursed if he/she receives over 10% but less than 15% of the votes²⁵. Furthermore, deposits can be reimbursed to candidates running for proportional representation seats if his/her party obtains at least one seat.

Concerning gender representation, the Public Official Election Act provides that 16% of the National Assembly "Kuk Hoe" must be women. Also, *Article 47* of the Public Official Election Act specifies that for the list proportional representation elections, whereby 56 deputies are elected, political parties must include 50% women on candidate lists. For the majority portion of the election, whereby 243 representatives are elected in single-member

districts, political parties shall include at least 30% of women candidates in their district nominations²⁶.

To further deepen electoral integrity and inclusive practices, the law frowns against arrests of political candidates during the electoral period. Article 11 of the Public Official Election Act provides that a candidate for any election, whether Presidential, National Assembly, or local government council elections, cannot be arrested or detained during the electoral cycle unless he is caught while committing a very serious crime²⁷.

THE NATIONAL ELECTION COMMISSION

The National Election Commission (NEC) is the body responsible for conducting and administering elections in South Korea²⁸. They are also responsible for safeguarding the legitimacy of democratic institutions and the peaceful transitions of power. The NEC was established in 1963 as an independent constitutional body alongside the National Assembly, the Supreme Court and the Constitutional Court as a result of the Fifth Constitutional Amendment²⁹. The NEC main responsibilities are managing elections, national referendums, affairs of political parties and political funds. It is also responsible for civic education, which is done through the Korean Civic Education Institute for Democracy (KOCEI); heads the Boundary Delimitation Commission (set up before elections to decide constituency boundaries); and lastly, manages public and private organizations, and political parties' elections entrusted to it³⁰.

The NEC is composed of nine Commissioners vis-à-vis: three nominated by the President, three nominated by the National Assembly, and three nominated the Supreme Court. Of these nine are two critical roles of the Chairperson and Standing Commissioner both of whom are elected from the nine nominated commissioners. One commissioner from the three Commissioners nominated by the Supreme Court who is also a Supreme Court judge is elected as Chairperson. While the Standing Commissioner is a state minister level and is a fulltime position. He/she supports the Chairperson and oversees the Secretariat as directed by the Chairperson. The Commissioners are supported by a Secretariat, which is headed by a Secretary General³¹.

As stipulated in the South Korean constitution³² and Election Commission Act³³, the 6-year term and status of each Election Commission are strictly guaranteed. This is to ensure the impartial performance of the NEC without any external interference. Furthermore, no member of the NEC can be arrested or detained unless either he/she is a flagrant offender, or commits a crime related to internal rebellion, foreign invasion, diplomatic relations, explosives, arson, narcotics, currency, securities, stamps, seals, murder, battery, arrest, detention, theft, robbery, or violation of the National Security Act³⁴. The NEC has a four-tier organizational structure³⁵ namely:

- National Election Commission (NEC) at the top, which is composed of nine commissioners, inclusive of the chairperson, and the standing (who works full-time) commissioner

- 17 Si/Do election commissions (Special Metropolitan City)
- 250 Gu/Si/Gun election commissions
- 3,481 Eup/Myeon/Dong (Township) election commissions

In addition, overseas voting committee is temporarily established at overseas embassies for the presidential and national assembly elections.

Under Articles 114(6) and 115 of the South Korean Constitution, the NEC has the power to issue guidelines relating to the administration of elections, referenda, and administrative affairs relating to political parties. These guidelines must nonetheless be within the scope of the electoral legislation and must relate to electoral management and internal disciplines of political parties.

Under the administrative control of the NEC, there is the *Election Broadcast Deliberative Committee*, *Election News Deliberative Committee* and the *Internet Election News Deliberative Committee*³⁶ – established under the Public Official Election Act. The Election Broadcast Deliberative Committee encourages active discussion and debates among political parties, while the Election News Deliberative Committee and Internet Election News Deliberative Committee monitor traditional and internet media to ensure accurate reporting of facts. The NEC is also engaged in voter education and sensitization during elections. It even subsidizes neutral organizations engaged in promoting policy elections³⁷.

The NEC also has the authority to investigate the illegal use of political funds and to request the inspection and submission of communication documents. This is facilitated through its “Supervisory Group of Vote Rigging”³⁸ and “Cyber Supervisory Group of Vote Rigging”³⁹. While the former was set up to monitor vote-rigging at all levels during elections, the latter is to monitor vote-rigging done through the Internet.

For diaspora voting, the National Election Commission establishes an overseas election commission for the Establishment of Overseas Diplomatic and Consular Missions of the Republic of Korea for such purpose⁴⁰. The overseas election commission would arrange for voting witnesses who may wish to witness the status of voting in the overseas polling place⁴¹.

POLITICAL PARTIES AND PARTY SYSTEM

Political Parties are governed by the laws administered by the National Electoral Commission⁴². For a political party to have legal standing under South Korean laws, it must register with the electoral commission and have a head office in Seoul; the capital of South Korea after it has formed not less than five corresponding party offices in at least five districts in the country⁴³.

It is worthy to note that merely setting up party offices in five districts of the country would not be sufficient. However, each district must have a minimum of 1000 registered party members for such a party to fulfil the requirement of the law⁴⁴.

South Korea operates a multi-party system⁴⁵ with two major political parties while the remaining parties are regarded as “smaller parties”⁴⁶. Democratic Party and United Future Party, are the two major political parties in the country. The United Future Party is a recent merger of the Liberty Korea Party, New Conservative Party, and Forward for Future 4.0⁴⁷. The smaller parties include the Party for People's Livelihoods (merger of the Bareunmirae Party, Party for Democracy and Peace, and New Alternative Party), Justice Party, People Party, Open Democratic Party, Basic Income Party, and Period Transition Party.⁴⁸ The 2020 elections also saw the rise of a feminist political party “The Women's Party” (Yosong-oui Dang) which based their campaign on sexual discrimination, strict beauty standards and legalizing abortion among others⁴⁹.

ELECTION CAMPAIGNS

Election campaigns in South Korea start from after the end of registration of candidates and end the day before the date of Election⁵⁰. Political parties and candidates are allowed to establish election campaign offices or election campaign liaison offices. These offices are meant to deal with election campaigns and other matters concerning the elections⁵¹. Just like the political parties or candidates, the election campaign offices or election campaign liaison offices is expected to file periodic reports with the NEC on its activities and expenses⁵².

Every candidate running for elections are mandated by law to prepare and publish a printed document containing all the candidate’s campaign promises⁵³. The document shall be called “Written Campaign Promises” and it shall state the candidate’s campaign promises, the goals, priority order, execution procedures, term of execution, and plan for raising fund for each project (The candidate is not allowed to mention the plans or policies of other

political parties or candidates). All the campaign promises of candidates are posted on the internet by the NEC for the public to view⁵⁴. Under the law, only the Press can appraise and compare the policies and campaign promises of candidates⁵⁵.

Election campaigns cannot be conducted through telephone, text messages, letters, telegrams or any method not approved by law⁵⁶. Even door-to-door campaigning is prohibited⁵⁷. However, candidates can campaign through emails or social media platforms, newspaper and TV advertisement, campaign bulletins/brochures, TV interviews, campaign rallies and their campaign websites⁵⁸. To prevent illegal campaigns, cash rewards were given to those who reported election law violations. Administrative fines were imposed on those who received illegal contributions (e.g. money, food) from candidates⁵⁹. These efforts helped ensure free, fair and credible elections.

One of the interesting issues during the election campaign in South Korea is the issue of campaign posters. Unlike most countries, the nature of campaign posters is heavily regulated by law in South Korea. To put in perspective, the law states what should be mandatorily included in campaign posters and copies of the same submitted to the NEC. Failure to do so would be treated as an offence⁶⁰. Article 64(1) of the Public provides that all campaign posters for elections in South Korea must contain the following:

1. The photograph of a candidate alone
2. Name and Emblem of Candidates' Party (while an independent candidate will state he/she is "independent")
3. Candidates' career and academic background; and
4. Political views, the platform and policy of candidates' political party

Also, if it is an election of a National Assembly member of local constituency, the roll of candidates for the proportional representative National Assembly members must be included. Similarly, candidates and political parties cannot just unilaterally correct or withdraw from circulation already submitted campaign posters unless it is within situations approved by the law⁶¹. Furthermore, the law expects that the campaign posters should be posted based on the population density of the area.

Publication of Public Opinion Polls is heavily restricted in South Korea during the election period⁶². This is to ensure that public polls do not influence the voting choices of the people. Accordingly, no public opinion can be conducted within 60 days to an election, while results of any opinion poll conducted earlier cannot be published within 6 days to the election. Furthermore, before opinion poll can be conducted, such an organization must inform the NEC as to the survey design and methodology to be adopted.

During election periods, Political parties in South Korea are expected to campaign fairly and respectfully to their opposing parties or candidates. They are not to engage in any conduct detrimental to the good morals and social order in supporting, propagandizing, criticizing, or opposing the platform and policy of a political party or the political views of a candidate⁶³.

THE ELECTORATES

South Korea evolved from a net-emigration to a net-immigration society in the 1990s, with foreign nationals accounting for approximately 4% of the total population of 51 million in 2016, which altered the cultural and ethnic homogeneity, due to the number of migrant workers and multicultural marriages.⁶⁴ The national language is Korean, which is spoken in several local dialects, with the Seoul dialect of the Korean language being the generally accepted modern standard, while English is widely taught in junior and high schools. Citizen's religious affiliation across the country, includes Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Islam and Shamanism.⁶⁵ In addition to being the most educated country in the world,⁶⁶ 91.8 % of Koreans live in urban areas according to the Statistics of Urban Planning 2018, published jointly by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport and the Korea Land and Housing Corporation, with 4.68 % of the population engaging in agriculture, 24.84 % in industry and 70.48 % in services.⁶⁷

Against the expectation for the low turn-out of voters owing to fear of getting infected, a 26.7 % turn-out was recorded for early voting compared to the 12.19 % recorded in 2016⁶⁸. This shows the extent of the trust for the government by its citizens, which was also evident in the adherence to the code of conduct released by NEC, which includes the use of personal protection equipment and social distancing measures.

GENDER AND WOMEN REPRESENTATION

South Korea like many other societies is patriarchal operating a unicameral legislative system with less than 20% women representation⁶⁹. It is 118th in global ranking of women in the national parliament. In 2018 South Korea became the centre of the #MeToo movement in Asia⁷⁰ which spurred momentum on gender issues in the country including the 2019 Constitutional Court's decision legalizing abortion.

However, the 2020 elections saw the rise of a feminist political party the Women's Party (Yosong-oui Dang). The party campaigned on issues of gender equality in political representation, gender-based violence, socioeconomic and sexual discrimination against women, women body integrity and legalizing abortion among others⁷¹.

There is also a 50% candidate gender quota for national level seats, this has made it easy for women to be elected into position. This election produced the highest number of female parliamentarians since the country's 1987 start of democratization. 57 women, including 30 from the ruling Democratic Party and 18 from the United Future Party were elected making it 19% women representation of 300 seats in the parliament⁷². In the just concluded election, women had their first feminist party on the ballot (Women's Party), though they couldn't secure a seat at the poll but it was good start with 200,000 votes despite being only two months old by the election day. Democratic Party has 30 female legislators; while conservative opposition united future party has 18. Also, worth mentioning is that most women winners were average 4 years younger than their male counterparts but were as highly educated and politically experienced as the men. Equally, among the elected legislators were number of high-profile feminist activists and leaders⁷³.

APRIL 2020 ELECTION RESULTS AND STATISTICS

For the elections, there was a total of 150,000 polling station staff and 70,000 counting station staff across the country⁷⁴. With a population of 51,843,268 citizens, South Korea recorded a high number of eligible voters, which made up 84.9 % (49.6 % – male, 50.4 % – female) of the entire population of which 53 % of were between the ages of 18 and 49, with a significant increase of 1,893,849 when compared to the number of eligible voters recorded during the 20th parliamentary elections which is a total of 43,994,247. Table 1 shows the electoral statistics of the elections.

Table 1: Electoral Statistics of South Korea

S/ N	City/Province	Constituencies	Polling Districts	Eligible Voters	Ballots Cast
	Total	253	14,330	43,994,247	29,126,396
1	Seoul Metropolitan City	49	2,252	8,477,244	5,775,433
2	Busan Metropolitan City	18	912	2,958,290	2,001,838
3	Daegu Metropolitan City	12	632	2,071,120	1,387,494
4	Incheon Metropolitan City	23	717	2,500,690	1,581,223
5	Gwangju Metropolitan City	8	369	1,208,263	795,844
6	Daejeon Metropolitan City	7	361	1,237,183	810,576
7	Ulsan Metropolitan City	6	284	953,648	654,379
8	Sejong Special Self-governing Province	2	79	263,388	180,395
9	Gyeonggi Province	59	3,186	11,067,819	7,193,937
10	Gangwon Province	8	667	1,323,766	874,184
11	North Chungcheong Province	8	505	1,354,046	865,923
12	South Chungcheong Province	11	747	1,781,956	1,112,253
13	North Jeolla Province	10	615	1,542,579	1,033,976
14	South Jeolla Province	10	864	1,592,850	1,079,454
15	North Gyeongsang Province	13	971	2,282,938	1,516,135
16	South Gyeongsang Province	16	940	2,823,511	1,914,323
17	Jeju Special Self-Governing Province	3	230	554,956	349,029

Source: National Election Commission of the Republic of Korea (2020)

NEW MEASURES AND STRATEGIES FOR THE ELECTIONS

The success of the Republic of Korean parliamentary elections despite a global pandemic and the Republic have suffered huge casualty at the start evidenced the importance of an efficient and professional election management body and the importance of the different electoral stakeholders working together towards achieving a single goal.

1. National Electoral Commission

Ahead of the elections, NEC which is the top tier of the Election Commission at National level set out to ensure safe voting measures and environments by undertaking the following courses of action⁷⁵:

- Established voting and counting procedures to prevent and block the spread of COVID-19 through the creation of a system of disinfection that promoted citizen's safety and allowed them to vote with confidence.
- Guaranteed the suffrage of persons with confirmed cases of COVID-19, including by allowing confirmed patients to register for home voting and expanded the registration method for home voting.
- Actively implemented a way to guarantee the suffrage of those who were confirmed with cases of COVID-19 after the home voting registration period had closed.
- Ensured the suffrage of those who were in quarantine and whose movement was restricted on Election Day (April 15) such as those who come in contact with the confirmed patients or those who entered the country.
- Operated various kinds of training on a limited scale including using video conferencing systems, training material or videos. Where physicals trainings were held, hygiene rules such as using temperature checks, using hand sanitizer, and wearing of masks were upheld.
- The NEC put in place different voting methods including encouraging early voting, where an initial 26.7% of registered voters cast their votes in advance to avoid crowds⁷⁶. The early voting, for those unable to vote on election day, was done by establishing an election-only network (LAN and wireless) and using the integrated voters' list, which enabled voters to cast their ballots at any polling station across the country regardless

of their registered address. This was done across the country in 3,508 polling stations⁷⁷, while voting on Election Day was done by casting ballots at designated polling stations according to registered addresses, with one polling station installed per polling district, with a total of 14,330 polling stations across the country with a 26.9 % voter turn-out.

Postal ballot boxes from early voting outside relevant districts, overseas voting, shipboard voting, and home voting, together with those from early voting inside their relevant district, as well as e-day ballot boxes, were transferred to the counting stations (251 counting stations across the country) set up by third-tier election commissions (Gu/Si/Gun) after the close of voting at 6 pm on election day⁷⁸. The NEC also drew up a code of conduct that was widely distributed to electorates and informed their disposition during the voting exercise⁷⁹.

Other measures employed by the NEC were efficient communication to the citizenry via non-physical means, maintaining transparency in tabulation and counting of votes, temperature checking at entrances to isolate voters with temperatures above 37.5 degrees Celsius to temporary polling booths, regular disinfection of polling booths, and dispatch of substantial human resource (20,000 additional workers) to put stringent measures in place⁸⁰.

2. Voter Education

In preparation for the Legislative elections amidst the pandemic, the National Election Commission released a voter code of conduct to educate voters' education. The code of conduct contained the following⁸¹:

- a. Wearing of masks at polling stations
- b. Checking of temperature before entering any voter with temperature over 37.5 degrees will vote at temporary installed polling booths.
- c. Washing of hands/sanitizing at entrance of polling unit.
- d. Provision of gloves at the entrance to all voters by the NEC
- e. Temporary lowering/removal of mask for identification
- f. When leaving booth, voter will remove and dispose of gloves in the bin at the exit.
- g. Disinfecting and cleaning polling units before and after voting.

In addition to releasing the voter code of conduct on its website, the NEC also placed banners and posters around the country as well as made use of Television Ads⁸².

3. Political Parties Campaigns

Electioneering in South Korea is usually a festive affair, with young volunteers performing synchronized dances to draw voters' attention⁸³. Vans with blaring loudspeakers and plastered with colourful posters weave through the streets. But this would not be the case in the 2020 elections. Despite the absence of lockdown measures in the country, restrictions on large gatherings, and social distancing requirements were all in place before the election period.⁸⁴ These measures forced political parties and candidates to resort to other methods of campaigning for votes through video messages disseminated through social media platforms, SMS and mobile phone applications, augmented reality (AR) technology, volunteer COVID-19-related work; such as sanitation and disinfection of neighbourhoods within constituencies of candidates, and sending of campaign materials and manifestos through print media distributed to households nationwide⁸⁵.

4. Electorates and Citizens

One interesting issue for the April 2020 is that every registered voter got a 10-step guide on how to behave and what to expect at polling places, which were numerous, and sufficiently staffed to avoid unmanageable lines. Another issue which affected the electorate was the campaign messages during the elections. Unlike other past elections, the issues of jobs, wages and North Korea's nuclear arms programme, would not dominate the 2020 South Korean national assembly elections⁸⁶. These previous high priority issues were eclipsed by the citizen's perception of the ruling administration's response to the pandemic⁸⁷. As such, the campaign messages were blurred and uncoordinated. Most parties were sucked up in the argument as to which of them could lift the country out of the quagmire caused by the coronavirus pandemic⁸⁸.

As noted earlier, the pandemic had transformed the mechanics of electioneering, campaigning and voting for millions of South Koreans. There were natural concerns that traditional election campaigns, voting procedures and polling stations could trigger a second wave of infections, just as the country appears to be bringing the outbreak under control. However, this was not the case as the pandemic increased citizen's enthusiasm to participate in the election. Since the electoral law provided for early voting⁸⁹, a record number of five million voters cast their votes early⁹⁰. This early voting was advantageous to senior citizens who still felt that going to the polling station was still too risky for them. Since rallies and all other forms of large gatherings were restricted, most of the electorates had to tune to other alternative platforms to get information about the elections and the campaign messages from the contesting political parties. Accordingly, political parties, as

well as the NEC, invested more of their efforts on sending information through the internet (websites) and social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter and YouTube).⁹¹

To make the voting run smoothly, the NEC, with the support of the government, mobilized armies of public servants, including young men doing civic duty in place of mandatory military service, to prepare for the election⁹². These ad-hoc personnel assisted in the disinfection of the 14,000 voting stations across the country as well as enforcing crowd control management and social distancing protocols during Election Day.

5. Voting and Counting

For voting, the NEC set up 14,330 polling stations to increase access to voters. Persons who have been confirmed to be infected with COVID-19 could vote from home, hospitals, mail-in and absentee ballots. They were given a deadline to register to vote from home which was provided for under the law⁹³ while those who showed symptoms could vote at temporary installed polling booths. There were thus four methods of casting votes summarized as follows⁹⁴:

- a. Home voting (prior registration period of 24th – 28th, March, for home delivery of ballot papers by mail),
- b. Overseas voting (1st - 6th of April),
- c. Shipboard voting (7th - 10th of April),
- d. Early voting (10th and 11th of April, 6:00 am - 6:00 pm) and
- e. Election Day voting (15th of April, 6:00 am - 6:00 pm).

Voters at the polling units wore masks, had their temperature taken, washed their hands and wore gloves provided by the NEC as well as stood three foot apart, temporarily lowering their masks to be identified before the voted. They also disposed of the masks after voting at the exit of the polling unit. Polling personnel (station manager and staff) wore level D protective clothing same as medical personnel. Voting materials used at early voting polling stations such as polling booths and stationery were disposed of at the facility. While other equipment such as early voting IT equipment, ballot boxes, marking devices and return envelopes were transferred after disinfection and sterilization⁹⁵.

86,000 South Korean citizens in 40 countries with COVID-19 outbreaks could not vote as a result of the closure of those polling stations by the NEC in 86 Diplomatic Missions. Some of the countries are the United States, Italy and Germany⁹⁶.

All election officials (polling station manager, polling station staff, and observers) used facial masks and medical gloves. Personnel in charge of checking voter's temperatures utilized face shields, masks, and medical gloves. A member of the polling station staff was

designated in advance to be in charge of temporary polling booths, while training of polling station workers on disinfection and voting procedures were done using videos uploaded on YouTube and other channels, in addition to training of designated staff members to prevent the spread of COVID-19 provided by the polling station manager⁹⁷. There also screens displaying messages about COVID-19 directives (e.g. keep safe distances; wear masks always, minimize conversations etc.).

Counting of votes was carried out in stations that were set up by the Gu/Si/Gun election commissions (third tier of regional government). Postal ballot boxes (from ballots cast outside their relevant district during early voting, overseas voting, shipboard voting and home voting) together with early voting ballot boxes from those who cast their ballots inside their relevant district were transferred to the counting center after the close of voting at 6pm on election day. Election day ballot boxes were transferred from the polling station to the counting center after the close of voting⁹⁸.

6. Election Observation

The NEC suspended international observation of the election⁹⁹. Provisions were made for observers and the media to follow election day activities remotely via YouTube with translation available in multiple languages¹⁰⁰. It also produced a video summary of the Election Day activities which was posted on 1st of May. However, domestic observers were able to observe from a safe distance within the polling station arena and following laid out protocols and guidelines. This includes observers staying at least two meters from the voting when observing¹⁰¹.

SUMMARY OF COVID-19 PRECAUTIONS

- Polling station staff provided guidance to maintain a distance of one or more meters between voters inside and outside of polling stations.
- If a polling station was crowded inside, a voter who had his/her temperature checked at the entrance was allowed to enter the polling station after waiting until the number of voters in the polling station had reduced.
- Polling station staff regularly disinfected election equipment (such as polling booths, marking devices and ballot boxes) touched by voters using disinfecting tissues
- Provided guidance to polling station staff and observers on refraining from unnecessary conversations, even between voters.
- Frequent instructions were given on conduct for counting center staff through the counting station broadcasting facilities. Messages included “wear a mask at all

times”, “refrain from unnecessary conversation”, “wash your hands frequently”, “observe at a proper distance”.

- Disinfection tread-plate mats were appropriately installed at the entrance of the facility or at the entrance of the counting center.
- Hand sanitizer was placed in suitable locations, including at the entrance of the counting center.
- Facility managers were requested to keep the ventilation system, including air conditioners and ventilators, in the counting center facility running continuously.
- Circulated air from outside into the center by opening windows periodically while ensuring that it did not interfere with the counting of votes.
- For facilities without or with insufficient ventilation facilities, temporary ventilation systems were installed where possible including leasing equipment.
- Snacks were distributed sequentially and people were asked to refrain from talking whilst eating.

- Voting observers kept two meters or more away from voting when observing.
- Only authorized persons (designated polling station staff, quarantined voter and observers) were allowed to enter the temporary polling booth
- they were also refrained from dialogue as much as possible.

- Carried out various kinds of training on a limited scale including using video conferencing systems, training material or videos. Where physicals trainings were held, hygiene rules such as using temperature checks, using hand sanitizer and wearing of masks were upheld.

- The polling station manager and staff wore level D protective clothing worn by medical personnel.
- Items such as polling booths and stationery used at early voting polling stations were disposed of at the facility, and relevant equipment used at special early voting stations such as early voting IT equipment, ballot boxes, marking devices and return envelopes were transferred after disinfection and sterilization.

Source: NEC (2020) Election Management in Response to COVID-19 and the 21st National Assembly

LESSONS FROM THE ELECTIONS

South Korea successfully conducted its 2020 parliamentary election during a pandemic with no new cases of COVID-19 reported as a result of the election¹⁰². Aggressive tracing, testing and treatment played an important role in success of the election, high literacy rate of the citizens may have played an important role too.

Provision of protective gears for voters and election officials also gave people the confidence to come out to vote¹⁰³. South Korea was able to protect public health and its democracy at the same time because of lessons learned from past MERS corona outbreak of 2015 where 186 persons were infected and 38 died. These led to the changes in the laws giving government greater powers over individual privacy rights when it involves public health issues¹⁰⁴.

The Korean parliamentary elections offer several lessons on electoral administration. The lessons here advances integrity and credibility of the electoral process; promote the conduct of free, fair and acceptable elections; increase and guarantee citizens participation in the process; ensure internal party democracy is deepened and sustained; ensure engagement with critical stakeholder such as political parties, candidates, civil society in the delivery of electoral services.

S/N LESSONS

1 Public Health and Elections

- An efficient healthcare system contributed greatly to the success of the election.
- Public Health Specialists and Experts must be integrated into the Elections Operations and Managements to provide expert and technical advice on the issue of public health during any election-related activity.
- Government efforts towards containing and controlling the spread of the infection significantly contributed to the success of the elections without public health fatalities.

- Effective use of lessons from MERS corona experience. These lessons led to the changes in the laws giving government greater powers over individual privacy rights when it involves public health issues.

3

EMB and the Electoral Process

- The proactivity of the EMB in the organization of voting procedures to suit the prevailing situation around the country and the addition of the electorate code of conduct to existing electoral guidelines. Essentially, the EMB put in all efforts to prevent COVID-19 spread despite the rising curve around the world during the period.
- The need to review the voting procedure to integrate public health regulations and COVID-19 protocols. The EMB prepared and implemented systematic and specific voting procedures to block and prevent the spread of COVID-19 through close mutual cooperation with related agencies such as the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Ministry of Interior and Safety and referred to the guidelines on COVID-19 prevention measures.
- Voter' registration procedures should meet global standard and made more accessible to voters.
- The implementation of remote voting methods is essential in managing public health risks and election credibility.
- The EMB put a great deal of effort into minimizing blind spots in the voting rights of citizens by expanding and providing various voting methods, including home voting and special early voting polling stations for confirmed COVID-19 patients receiving treatment in hospitals or other facilities and allowing quarantined voters to cast their ballot after the close of voting on election day.
- The implementation of the electoral reforms mentioned in the text impacted the outcome of the elections. This is exemplified by the voter turnout recorded compared to previous elections.
- While South Korea deployed technology in its elections, most of the processes deployed were devoid of technology. They were practical processes like temperature checks, washing of hands, wearing of masks and wearing of hand gloves and standing one metre apart which can be done in Nigeria with little financial implications and devoid of the need to train experts.

- Efficient management and coordination of human and material resources as well as availability of required finance. Although the financial implications of the elections have not been declared yet, it can be stated that the availability of funds and resources in record time for utilization by the NEC is an integral contributing factor to the success of South Korea's just-concluded parliamentary elections.
- South Korea has a solid electoral legal framework that made provisions for early voting and voting in the absence (either outside registered residential areas or in diaspora). This gave room for inclusion and equal suffrage, which is necessary for elections high levels of credibility and integrity.
- The efficient use of ICT during the elections which was instrumental to the success of the elections can be largely ascribed to the high literacy level in South Korea, which is said to be the most educated country in the world according to the World Education Services (WES).
- Guidelines were produced for every aspect of the election day process and these guidelines emphasized public health protocols. Code of conduct for electorates were also produced and widely distributed including sending to homes.
- Adequate provision and enforcement of use of personal protection equipment, and prosecution for violation of directives for use.
- Setting up of more voting stations to increase access for voters and mitigate possible disease infection and spread
- Fundamentally building public confidence in the process by maintaining transparency in tabulation and counting of votes.
- Besides temperature checking at entrances to isolate voters with temperatures above 37.5 degrees Celsius to temporary polling booths, there was regular disinfection of polling booths, and dispatch of substantial human resource (20,000 additional workers) to ensure full implementation of stringent measures to comply with COVID-19 protocols.
- Leveraging of available human resource from civil and public servants' pool as stand-by ad-hoc electoral staff as well as using them to disinfect polling stations

- Appropriate investment in the ICT infrastructure and capabilities of EMB was a key factor of success. Most of the initiatives and measures introduced require new technologies and technical expertise. (INEC would do well to be fully equipped with the right technologies, equipment and personnel).

Political Parties and Campaigns

- The Electoral Act 2010 should be reviewed to enforce fair and respectful campaigning during elections. Propagandas, false appraisal of opponents' policies or ideas, and hateful rhetoric should be sanctioned with stiff penalties, which can be enforced by any aggrieved stakeholder.
- The Electoral Act should encourage the use of candidates' campaign promises booklet during elections. This booklet should contain the entire campaign promises and plans, and this would enable the voters to be acquainted with the policy proposals or plans of parties/candidates. Just like the South Korean NEC, INEC should make the booklet public and accessible to voters and the general public on its website.
- Political Parties and Candidates should invest more resources in voters' education as part of their campaign strategy. One of the factors that contributed to the huge turnout in South Korean elections was the aggressive online campaigns by the parties
- Political parties and candidates played complementary roles in mitigating public health challenges by sanitizing and disinfecting neighbourhoods within constituencies even though was a way of campaigning.

Electorates and Voter Education

- General resolve by government and citizens to preserve democracy by holding free, fair, and credible elections despite the challenging effects of the pandemic.
- Public trust in the government, which was largely aided by the governments' level of responsiveness, transparency, and accountability.
- Effective voters' education and sensitization strategy which importantly meets context needs. There was efficient public communication via non-physical means. This included increasing the medium of communication, improving the quality of messages and investing more resources in voters' education campaigns

- South Korean model of funding and subsidizing credible organizations engaged in promoting electoral policies, election and voters' education did not only help in the very high voter turnout but reflects the importance of collaboration and partnerships in electoral management and service delivery. It also proves the point that elections are collective enterprise where all stakeholders must work together for success to be achieved.
- Electorate code of conduct which was widely distributed to them informed their disposition during the voting exercise.

Voting Policy and Process

- The guidelines for elections should make the voting process as simple, clear and accessible to all strata of the electorate. It should contain important guides/instructions to both poll workers (ad hoc staff) and security agencies as to their duties and responsibilities of mitigating risks at the polling units.
- The guidelines for elections must contain more visual explanations than textual explanations. This makes it easier to grasp, comprehend and recalled from memory on election day.
- Adequate provision and enforcement of use of personal protection equipment and prosecution for violation of directives for use.

Electoral Legal Framework

- A solid electoral framework enabled the EMB to handle the public health risks and introduce robust initiatives. As noted already, all the exceptional measures in South Korea could not have been pulled off so timely and seamlessly, without the numerous legal and procedural provisions to facilitate inclusion and participation of voters been already part of the electoral framework of the country.
- Early voting contributed to increase in voters' turnout and reduce the pressure of Election Day voting. Absentee and early voting procedures addressed some of the extraordinary challenges that the pandemic posed. Revision and amendment of the Electoral Act to provide for early voting and voting in the absence (either outside registered residential areas or in diaspora) would encourage greater inclusion and equal suffrage that are necessary for ensuring the integrity and credibility of elections

- Elections during pandemic situations require huge human and financial resources. Therefore, legislature and executive should ensure that EMB is provided with sufficient funding to conduct elections during the pandemic, without risking its staff, the voters and public health. Although the financial implications of the elections have not been declared yet, it can be stated that the availability of funds and resources in record time for utilization by the NEC is an integral contributing factor to the success of South Korea's just-concluded parliamentary elections.

Women Representation

- Quota system and regimes are important strategies to ensure women are adequately represented as it gives women a foot in the door and a place on the table for policy and decision making (particularly in patriarchal contexts).
- Helping women win primaries and securing nomination is very effective in addressing women underrepresentation
- Women's political party provides a very important strategy of entryism into politics and space to increase women political participation and representation.
- Women's party bring critical issues that affect them and others to national discourse, and electoral campaign agendas particularly critical concerns of marginalized and excluded groups. These includes socioeconomic discrimination, bodily integrity, vulnerable groups political participation and representation and gender-based violence

CONCLUSION

The success of the elections in South Korea amid the pandemic has provided the world with a blueprint on how to conduct elections taking into account the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic. South Korea has been reported to be one of those countries that have effectively managed the spread of infection through widespread testing¹⁰⁵, which was evident in its historic decision to conduct its 21st parliamentary contests on the 15th of April 2020. This was achieved amidst the ravaging effects of the pandemic on the nation's economy and the recent electoral reforms in 2019, altering the electoral system which introduced new voting guidelines and lowered the voting age from 19 to 18 years.

The importance of lessons learned from the South Korean elections cannot be over-emphasized. Its prompt action to address the pandemic through opening the domestic economy, special immigration procedures and external restrictions, widespread and continuous testing, quarantine requirements, enforcement of COVID-19 rules, contact tracing: the importance of technology, competent and transparent government, other containment measures such as public solidarity and civil compliance, mandatory use of masks by South Koreans and lessons learned from the middle east respiratory syndrome (MERS) in 2015¹⁰⁶, gave rise to its ability to hold elections in an attempt to preserve its democracy is worthy of note and has a huge impact on the credibility and integrity of its electoral process. Not to be undermined as well, is the cooperation of electorates with the government, which was largely aided by the governments' effort in putting adequate safety measures in place. Thus, efforts made by stakeholders of the electoral process buttress the importance of democracy, and for the sole purpose of preserving democracy – other countries must imbibe these lessons.

Coming to Nigeria, in preparing for the 2020 Edo and Ondo Governorship elections, INEC will need to work with the National Centre for Disease Control and the State governments where the elections are to take place to gain public trust in the government's response to the pandemic. Public trust is critical success factor in South Korea despite the pandemic. Consulting with stakeholders such as political parties and CSOs to brainstorm on new methods of monitoring and observing the activities in the electoral process will be of utmost importance.

In doing all these, INEC will need to take into considerations extant electoral laws. As South Korea has shown, there is no need postponing elections, all stakeholders need to do

is work together to find proactive ways of holding successful elections within the electoral legal framework.

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About the Electoral Hub

The Electoral Hub (E-Hub), an organ of the Initiative for Research, Innovation and Advocacy in Development (**IRIAD**), is a multidisciplinary strategic think-tank which seeks to provide solutions to improve the credibility and integrity of the electoral process. It is conceptualized to complement the roles and activities of the different institutions, stakeholders and drivers of the electoral process and governance. E-Hub's aim is to strengthen electoral governance and accountability in Nigeria through the provision data and critical analysis supporting the credibility and integrity of the electoral process. Because we believe that the integrity of the electoral process is crucial in improving the electoral governance architecture and democracy in Nigeria. We also believe in contextual analysis for solutions rooted in the principles of justice and equity

The Hub's core values are knowledge-exchange, inclusion, justice, equity, transparency and accountability.

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