

SOUTH KOREA ELECTS SECOND CATHOLIC PRESIDENT MOON JAE-IN MUST BALANCE A DELICATE ECONOMY, MAY CLASH WITH TRUMP OVER THE NORTH.

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Former-human rights lawyer Moon Jae-In stands on a stage to greet supporters as exit polls began suggesting a landslide victory, in the central Gwanghwamun district of Seoul on May 9. On the following the day, Moon began his five-year term as president of South Korea. (Photo by Ed Jones/AFP)

North Asia's Christian stronghold, South Korea, has elected the Catholic liberal Moon Jae-in from the Democratic Party of Korea, in a landslide with about 40 percent of the votes in a three-way race.

As the son of North Korean immigrants, whose policies towards the North are less aggressive than his predecessors, Moon succeeds the disgraced Park Gyuen-hye, who was impeached in February and has since been arrested on corruption charges.

Moon won 41 percent of the vote followed by conservative Hong Jun-pyo with 24 percent and centrist Ahn Cheol-soo with 21 percent. The 64-year-old is the nation's second Catholic leader after Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003).

The former human rights lawyer has said he would skip a lavish inauguration ceremony and start work straight away.

Koreans now expect a more accountable government system and Moon has vowed to vacate the Blue House palace and instead work from the central government offices. Moon has also pledged to end the use of presidential pardons for executives found guilty of corruption.

"After the corruption scandal we had, I want a president that will serve with honesty, a president whose interest is centered on the country, not on his close friends," said a 57-year-old woman.

Among his challenges, Moon inherits a fragile economy that is the world's 12th largest.

People who have worked closely with the Moon campaign say that he will be careful not to damage the country's slight economic recovery. Recent economic data show exports have been rising for six straight months.

His economic adviser is the conservative Kim Kwang-doo. Some analysts have said Kim may be named prime minister or a senior cabinet minister in the new administration. Like Kim, some of Moon's other key advisers are also long-time advocates of tax cuts and lower regulations.

More than 11 percent of people who are 15-29 years of age and eligible to work were unemployed in March, much higher than South Korea's overall unemployment rate of 4.2 percent, according to Statistics Korea.

"I voted for him because of his job promises and at the same time he seems unlikely he will raise taxes," said a 27-year-old Korean.

Reform platform

Moon began his final campaign trail by holding a press conference at the Democratic Party of Korea headquarters in Yeouido, western Seoul, saying his victory would enable his administration to achieve profound reform.

Among those reforms, there could be a different political approach towards the neighbor North, especially amid the global and regional turmoil surrounding the Korean Peninsula.

During the election campaign, Moon suffered political attacks from his rivals over this issue linked to his supposed flexible stance on North Korea. This may bring him into conflict with the increasingly bellicose stance of the U.S. under the Trump administration.

Moon favors dialogue with North Korea to ease rising tension over its accelerating nuclear and missile program.

A former South Korean ambassador to the Vatican, who declined to be named, told ucanews.com, that Moon "won his battle on the ground during the political campaign".