

Breakaway parties threaten to disrupt South Korea's two-party system. Can they also end parliamentary gridlock?

March 24 2024, by Jong Eun Lee



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Contemporary South Korean politics has traditionally been dominated by just two main parties—in [common with many other countries](#) with strong presidential systems. But that could soon change.

Recent [voter discontent](#) is creating opportunities for smaller political parties in the upcoming parliamentary election on April 10, 2024.

Heading into that vote, the two main parties—President Yoon Suk Yeol's People Power Party and the opposition Democratic Party—between them hold 270 seats in the 300-member parliament. But both parties are grappling with internal struggles and political controversies that are fueling the prospect of new, breakaway parties making gains.

The result could be a multi-party legislature. As a [political scientist](#) with a focus on East Asia and international affairs, I believe that outcome has the potential of transforming the country's domestic and international agenda.

Parliamentary gridlock

Polling suggests that South Koreans haven't been happy with the performance of their politicians for years, with one 2022 survey putting [trust in the national assembly at just 24%](#). Events since then are unlikely to have improved confidence in either main party.

Since Yoon being elected president in 2022, his legislative agenda has been met with [resistance](#) by the opposition-controlled National Assembly. His [plans for reforming](#) the country's education, pension and labor systems have stalled as a result.

Meanwhile, Yoon has [vetoed multiple bills](#) passed by the National

Assembly, such as the ["yellow envelope" law](#), which limits companies' lawsuits for damage claims over labor union disputes, and legislation calling for special probes into the [crowd crush](#) inside Seoul's Itaewon district during Halloween weekend in 2022 that resulted in hundreds of deaths and injuries.

On [foreign policy](#), the opposition Democratic Party has faulted the Yoon government's pursuit of increased security ties with Japan in the face of continued bilateral tensions over Japan's past colonial history in Korea.

Specifically, the opposition criticized a [bilateral deal](#) on compensation for the victims of forced wartime labor in Korea, and the Yoon government's acceptance of Japan's release of wastewater from the [Fukushima nuclear plant](#) into the Pacific Ocean.

Last fall, partly as protest against the president's foreign policy and in a bid to overhaul the government's cabinet, the National Assembly passed a nonbinding [no-confidence motion](#) against Prime Minister Han Duck-soo, though Yoon refused to dismiss his premier.

The net result of the political gridlock is that both the Yoon government and the Democratic Party face high levels of [public disapproval](#). Yoon's approval rating [has stagnated](#) below 40%, and the majority of voters have expressed an intention to [hold his government accountable in the upcoming election](#) by supporting opposition parties.

However, the Democratic Party has failed to capitalize on Yoon's unpopularity, due to similar public [disapproval toward the party's leader, Lee Jae-myung](#).

Intraparty factions

South Korea's two main parties have frequently experienced internal

feuds among factions supportive and opposed to party leadership. In recent months, such factions opposed to both Yoon and Lee's leadership have bolted from their respective parties.

In January 2024, Lee Jun-Seok, former People Power Party chairman, started the [New Reform Party](#) with party members [who protested](#) the pro-Yoon faction's seemingly cliquish party leadership. This "non-Yoon" faction has also [criticized](#) the [president's veto](#) of the special counsel bill to investigate allegations surrounding first lady Kim Geon-hee, which includes claims of violating [anti-graft laws](#) and involvement in [stock price manipulation](#).

The Democratic Party is facing a similar challenge. Also in January 2024, Lee Nak-yon, former prime minister under the previous Democratic government of President Moon Jae-in, started the New Future Party, criticizing his former party as having turned into a "[bulletproof shield](#)" for the unpopular leader Lee Jae-myung. Specifically, the "non Jae-myung" faction have criticized him for [refusing to step down](#) despite being under criminal investigation on corruption charges.

Opportunities for breakaway parties

These new breakaway parties' strategy is to take advantage of South Korea's [mixed-member](#) proportional election system, which provides opportunities for smaller parties to win seats. To do so, they have been focusing efforts on building concentrated support among core groups of voters.

The New Reform Party [has gained support](#) among younger conservative male voters critical of the older generation of conservative politicians close to Yoon.

Meanwhile, the New Future Party [retains some support](#) among traditional Democratic Party members, who feel disappointed with the direction of the party. Several Democratic legislators who claimed to [have been purged](#) by the party leadership have joined Lee Nak-yeon, widening the schism within the main opposition party.

Potential impact

The latest polls [indicate a tight race](#) between the People Power Party and the Democratic Party, with a 37.7% and 36.9% share of the vote, respectively. If the breakaway parties [win even a small number of seats](#), the result could be a "hung parliament," in which neither main party can form a single-party majority.

That would leave smaller parties with huge legislative leverage.

The New Reform Party is more likely to [partner](#) with the Yoon government on policy agendas—despite [personal antipathy](#) between Yoon and Lee Jun-Seok. On foreign policy, New Reform Party members have [expressed support](#) for pragmatic relations with Japan and have warned against excessive anti-Japan nationalist rhetoric in domestic politics.

On social and economic policies, the New Reform Party's platform likewise aligns with the Yoon government in supporting the expansion of South Korea's [semiconductor industry](#) and abolishing the [Ministry of Gender Equality](#).

Particularly on gender issues, the New Reform Party could push the Yoon government further toward positions that appeal to [younger male conservative voters](#), such as by introducing female military service. At present, only men are subject to South Korea's mandatory military conscription, a policy that many younger South Korean men perceive as

discrimination.

Lee Nak-yon's New Future Party is [more critical](#) of the Yoon government's domestic and foreign policies. However, with its [platform to end](#) two-party gridlock, the New Future Party could also seek a role as [an arbitrator](#) over contentious policy issues.

The new parties could also support the opposition Democratic Party in pressuring the Yoon government to be more accountable. Specifically, Yoon could face increased demands to approve investigations on the allegations surrounding the first lady and to solicit opposition parties' consent for future cabinet nominations.

It is still uncertain how well the breakaway parties will perform in the upcoming election. And they face competition from [another new party](#), the National Innovation Party, that is politically aligned with the Democratic Party.

One recent election in East Asia will give [these new parties encouragement](#): Taiwan's [legislative election](#) in January saw a new third party become kingmaker in the legislative assembly.

If any of the new South Korean parties are able to emerge from the election as a parliamentary kingmaker, it would represent a crack in the country's two-party system and could free up the gridlock that has dogged parliamentary politics in recent years.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Breakaway parties threaten to disrupt South Korea's two-party system. Can they also end parliamentary gridlock? (2024, March 24) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-03-breakaway-parties-threaten-disrupt-south.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.