

THE NEW LEADERS OF DPK AND PPP: WHAT WILL THIS MEAN FOR KOREA'S POLITICAL FUTURE

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South Korean politics is entering a phase of heightened instability marked by intensified polarization, leadership conflicts, and deteriorating institutional trust. The impeachment and removal of President Yoon Suk-yeol and subsequent early presidential election have deepened partisan confrontation rather than easing it. Newly elected party leaders—Jung Cheong-rae and Jang Dong-hyuk—symbolize a shift toward more confrontational, zero-sum politics, driving legislative deadlock and escalating battles over institutional reform. Despite the public perception of severe inter-party conflict, informal communication between floor leaders continues, enabling limited bipartisan cooperation on key social and welfare legislation. Nonetheless, both political blocs face structural vulnerabilities: conservatives struggle with factional fragmentation, while progressives risk overextension amid heightened expectations. This issue brief argues that Korea's democratic stability is increasingly challenged by adversarial political dynamics. Without renewed leadership and mechanisms for sustained bipartisan engagement, the country may face prolonged governance paralysis and deeper institutional polarization.

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At the Threshold of Systemic Risk: Polarization in Korean Politics

Since liberation from Japanese colonial rule in 1945, followed by division, war, rapid industrialization, and democratization, South Korea has undergone extraordinary political transformation within a compressed historical timeframe.¹ Historical traumas such as military

authoritarianism, ideological confrontation, and disputes over North Korea's regime legitimacy, have permeated the political domain, simultaneously driving and instrumentalizing conflict.² Consequently, polarization has intensified to a destabilizing threshold, jeopardizing national governance.³ This analysis captures current conditions, rapidly evolving political dynamics and persistent partisan

entrenchment dominating media and public discourse.

Following the declaration of martial law in December 2024, divisions in Korean politics became more entrenched. With the early election of new President Lee Jae-myung, the Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) has been strengthening its leadership by pursuing a series of bold political measures. After election, both parties held national conventions to establish new leadership. On August 2, candidate Jung Cheong-rae was elected as the eighth party leader of the DPK.⁴ Following this, on August 26, Jang Dong-hyuk was elected as the fourth party leader of the People Power Party (PPP).⁵ After the inauguration of new leadership, the two parties continued to clash daily over major issues.

Jung Cheong-rae: 'I Will Lead the Fight' - Bringing 1980s Activist DNA to the Front of Ruling Party Reform

Jung Cheong-rae is the new leader of the Democratic Party of Korea, South Korea's leading progressive party. A four-term lawmaker, he's a politician who forged his own iconic path within the DPK. His political identity is deeply rooted in the student democracy movement of the 1980s.

Born in 1965, Jung entered politics through student activism. During the late 1980s, he took part in large anti-authoritarian protests and even led an occupation of the U.S. ambassador's residence in Seoul.⁶ This resulted in a two-year prison sentence under the National Security Law. His formal political career began in the early 2000s when he joined "Nosamo",⁷ an influential grassroots community that supported President Roh Moo-hyun. Riding a wave of public backlash against Roh's impeachment, he won his first parliamentary seat in 2004.

Throughout his political career, he participated in several high-profile political campaigns, including a 24-day hunger strike in 2014⁸ demanding a special law on the Sewol ferry disaster. Even when he temporarily lost his nominations, he stayed active in party campaigns and eventually returned to the National Assembly in 2020, winning his fourth term in 2024. Jung has held

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senior party leadership positions and chaired major committees in the National Assembly, including the Science and ICT Committee and later the Judiciary Committee.

His national prominence rose sharply during the impeachment of former President Yoon Suk-yeol. Serving as the chief representative of the National Assembly's Impeachment Prosecution Team,⁹ he helped present the case that led to Yoon's unanimous removal by the Constitutional Court. His victory in the 2025 party leadership race reflects strong support from progressive grassroots voters who favor assertive, activist-style politics. Now, Jung stands as the leading figure of the Democratic Party's hard-line progressive wing.

At the party convention, his primary goal appears to be reforming the three major institutions: the prosecution, the media, and the judiciary.¹⁰ He stated, "I'll do the fighting, so the President (can) just focus on his work."¹¹ After being elected party leader, he formed a special committee within the DPK to promote three major reforms¹² and immediately launched its activities. Furthermore, he has continued his hard-line stance against the PPP, stating, "I believe I can disband the People Power Party ten, hundred times."¹³

Jang Dong-hyeok: ‘Even Under Martial Law, God Has a Plan’ - Judge to Political Warrior

Jang Dong-hyeok is a former judge who became the new leader of South Korea’s main conservative party, the People Power Party, in 2025. Before entering politics, he spent many years working in public service—first as an education official, and later as a judge after passing the national bar exam.¹⁴ During his judicial career, he worked at several major courts including the Seoul Central District Court, and he also served as a judge dispatched to the National Assembly.

Jang decided to leave the bench in 2020 to run for office. His first attempt failed, but he succeeded two years later in a by-election and entered the National Assembly for the first time. He was re-elected in 2024 and quickly became involved in important committees such as the Judiciary Committee and the Budget Committee.

In the early days of his political career, Jang was considered close to the party’s mainstream faction,¹⁵ which was centered on party leader Han Dong-hoon. However, as the party divided

during the impeachment, Jang expressed his intention to resign from the Supreme Council,¹⁶ broke away from the mainstream and emerged as one of the strongest voices opposing the impeachment movement. He participated in large conservative rallies led by Christian groups, delivering speeches, such as “God has a plan even in this martial law.”¹⁷

When the party prepared for new leadership elections, Jang positioned himself as a candidate who would fight aggressively against what he called threats to conservative values. His campaign emphasized strong, confrontational messaging, including criticism of internal party members who he believed were not loyal to conservative principles.¹⁸ This approach resonated with many grassroots conservative voters, helping him secure a decisive victory over other right-wing candidates.

A hardliner, he has consistently expressed his opposition to any special prosecutorial investigation into former President Yoon and his wife.¹⁹ He also publicly raised issues with the current government, including its real estate policy²⁰ and the approval of an extension of the special prosecutor’s investigation into the internal strife.²¹ He is now widely viewed as a leading representative of the hard-line conservative wing and a key player shaping the country’s ongoing political debates.

No Room for Consensus: Jung vs. Jang Signal the Dawn of ‘Collision Politics’

The two major parties—led by Jung Cheong-rae of the DPK and Jang Dong-hyeok of the PPP — have entered a period of intense confrontation. Despite agreeing during the APEC Summit season²² not to escalate political conflict, both sides quickly reverted to hardline messaging.²³ The leadership styles of Jung and Jang have reinforced a “collision course” dynamic that leaves little room for bipartisan cooperation.

The DPK has been aggressively pushing its legislative agenda by framing recent political events—such as martial law and insurrection controversies—as evidence of deep structural problems requiring urgent reform. The DPK is

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accelerating efforts on judicial reform, special investigations, and media reform, while going as far as labeling the PPP a “constitutional threat.”²⁴ This rhetorical escalation has mobilized progressive supporters but has also intensified partisan tensions.

Meanwhile, the PPP is countering by highlighting controversies surrounding the administration. Conservative lawmakers have focused on issues such as alleged corruption involving close aides, governance disputes, and accusations of political retaliation. These narratives have become central to the party’s messaging strategy in the National Assembly, especially during the current parliamentary audit where both sides have clashed repeatedly.

Nevertheless, though the conflict between the party leaders has been highly amplified, informal communication among the floor leadership of both parties has continued.²⁵ Recently, several bills—such as the amendment to the Emergency Medical Services Act and legislation supporting delivery workers, residents of vulnerable housing, and victims of digital sex crimes—have been passed through bipartisan agreement, reflecting some positive developments. However, this confrontational dynamic is expected to continue during the budget process at the end of the year.²⁶ With both sides relying heavily on consolidating their core support base rather than seeking compromise, politics is likely to remain hostage to a depleted environment for at least the next six months.

Presidential Contenders or Political Wrecking Trains - Questioning Their Survival in the Race for 2027

It remains uncertain whether either leader will emerge as a viable presidential contender. For Jung, critics have long argued that his hardline political style could become a liability for the DPK government.²⁷ Jang, meanwhile, has signaled a willingness to align with the faction that opposed former President Yoon’s impeachment²⁸—often framed as ‘the far-right’—which some observers believe could hinder the PPP’s ability to broaden its electoral appeal.²⁹

The party leader must manage internal factions, engage in confrontation and negotiation within the National Assembly, and ultimately earn public approval through their performance in the role. Many would-be presidential candidates have stumbled at this stage, and both Jung and Jang are expected to face their first major public evaluation in next year’s local elections.

In South Korean political history, many presidents previously served as party leaders. This is because winning a presidential primary generally requires consolidating control over one’s party and demonstrating strong leadership capacities. The party leader must manage internal factions, engage in confrontation and negotiation within the National Assembly, and ultimately earn public approval through their performance in the role. Many would-be presidential candidates have stumbled at this stage, and both Jung and Jang are expected to face their first major public evaluation in next year’s local elections.

Progressive Idealism, Conservative Trauma: A Time to Debate Survival, Not Victory

The Conservative Bloc’s Strategic Paralysis and Structural Decline

In contemporary Korean politics, the conservative bloc exhibits profound strategic paralysis, marked by the unprecedented impeachment of two presidents. The bloc appears unable to overcome the resulting psychological and political trauma, remaining trapped between

appeasing a hardline base advocating martial law and preserving electoral viability among centrist voters. Inclusion of such factions restricts strategic flexibility, whereas exclusion risks eroding core electoral competitiveness. This internal dichotomy underscores ongoing instability and the repeated loss of centrist support.³⁰

Simultaneously, the party's entrenched and aging power structure, characterized by the dominance of absolute authority figures and reliance on rigid support bases, generating outcomes that diverge from public sentiment. The nomination of younger candidates fuels skepticism regarding whether they represent authentic generational renewal or merely reinforce existing hierarchies.³¹ Consequently, the conservative bloc is increasingly perceived as lacking a coherent policy vision beyond anti-progressive positioning. Without comprehensive structural reform, genuine leadership transition, and electorally credible candidate selection, the bloc may approach political obsolescence in forthcoming cycles.

Progressive Complacency and Strategic Vulnerability in Korean Politics

The progressive bloc, benefiting from conservative failures and structural political dynamics, currently enjoys momentum. Yet excessive complacency or overextension risks destabilizing public support.³² Reckless partisan maneuvers, unchecked executive power, or unresolved domestic and international challenges, ranging from real estate and youth pensions to judicial and ideological disputes could reverse gains and replicate past electoral losses.³³ Amid a fluid international environment and emerging intra-party dynamics, particularly between Party Leader Jeong Cheong-rae and the Lee administration, the progressive bloc must balance short-term tactical actions against long-term strategic objectives to ensure sustainable governance and secure enduring political advantage.

Conclusion

Korean political polarization undermines governance and risks strategic miscalculations amid rapid international change.³⁴ Without

principled, cooperative leadership fostering constructive discourse and generational renewal, polarization persists, threatening national stability; electorates increasingly favor parties demonstrating commitment to accountable, forward-looking policymaking.

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