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## *The domestic political situation in South Korea:*

*What controversial moves has the President made and what was the reason for such a decision?*



The domestic political situation in the ROK is not easy at the moment. In August 2024, the President of the Republic made two rather controversial moves which, according to the author of the article, are not only a reflection of what is happening, but also a way of dealing with the current situation.

**Can the pardons be considered a controversial decision?**

This year's National Liberation Day of Korea was a truly momentous occasion. On the eve of the "holiday of the return of light", 13 August 2024, [President Yoon Suk Yeol signed a decree for a special amnesty](#). A total of 55 politicians and high-ranking government officials will be pardoned. The names listed in the decree are: former South Gyeongsang Province Governor Kim Kyoung-soo, former Senior Secretary for Political Affairs of the Presidential Office Hyun Gi-hwan, former Senior Secretary for Policy Coordination Ahn Jong-beom, former Director of the National Intelligence Service Won Sei-hoon, former

Senior Secretary for Political Affairs of the President under the Park Geun-hye administration Cho Yoon-sun, former Chief of the ROK Police Department Cho Hyun-oh, and former Mayor of Daejeon Kwon Sun-taek. The decree states that the amnesty is primarily for officials who have “dedicated their lives to the country and society”.

However, attentive readers, who are familiar with the author’s works, will immediately see the catch, because the pardon was not granted to the most deserving people, but rather the opposite, to “specific” people. So, let us first refresh our memories of the events of recent years and recall why certain people were put behind bars.

- Won Sei-hoon, the main character in the “Werewolves in Shoulder Straps” case, in which prosecutor Yoon Suk Yeol became famous in the media.
- Ahn Jong-beom, a figure in the corruption crisis that led to Park Geun-hye’s impeachment, took bribes and tried to pressure big business to fund organisations linked to Choi Soon-sil.
- Cho Yoon-sun is the father of the ‘blacklist’ of cultural figures who were stripped of state funding because they were unhappy with Park Geun-hye’s policies.
- Hyun Gi-hwan, convicted of illegally supporting pro-Park conservative groups.

The presidential pardon of ex-governor Kim Kyoung-soo deserves special attention. You may know him as a member of Moon Jae-in’s inner circle, ex-governor of South Gyeongsang Province and the man Moon Jae-in wanted to see as his successor. However, none of the above trappings helped Kim escape punishment, and he was eventually sentenced to two years for falsifying public opinion on the internet ([the infamous Druking blogger case](#)) ahead of the 2017 presidential election. Charges against him for organising massive fake news stories that provoked public outrage and the subsequent impeachment of Park Geun-hye remained unproven.

Kim received a presidential pardon in December 2022, but this did not lift his ban on political activity. As a result, Kim Kyoung-soo could not engage in political activity or run for public office until December 2027. However, this restriction has now been lifted.

[Lee Jae-myung welcomed](#) Kim’s reinstatement, saying he expected Kim to “play a great role for the people and the Democratic Party”. However, many of his supporters expressed uncertainty that Kim had such solid political assets.

However, [Han Dong-hoon](#), chairman of the ruling People’s Power Party, [expressed his disagreement with the pardon](#) of the former provincial governor. He said: “The reinstatement of a person who has not repented of committing a crime against democracy may not enjoy widespread public support”.

### **Why is the amnesty a demonstration of cross-party unity?**

In the author's opinion, everything that is happening is an internal political move, the result of which should be the achievement of some goals. The first is a formal demonstration of cross-party unity: both conservatives and democrats are being amnestied. The second is an attempt to launch a "counter-attack". The Democratic Party Congress will be held very soon, where Lee Jae-myung has no serious competition. Moreover, by the time this article goes to press, he will have been re-elected for a second term. His rivals are more nominal figures. Moon Jae-in's supporters within the Democratic Party have no serious leader. Those who could have fled to Cho Kuk's Rebuilding Korea Party. However, there are also many who want to regain dominance within the Democratic Party itself. In this context, Kim Kyoung-soo may have been released to compete with Lee Jae-myung and become the leader of the faction opposing him.

It is believed that Kim could become a unifying factor for Democrats outside Lee's faction and [a potential presidential candidate](#) for those who support former presidents Moon Jae-in and Roh Moo-hyun.

At this point, the conservative opposition is leading the public to believe that Han has started his own game and is no longer a conduit for Yoon Suk Yeol's thoughts. However, since the faction that was thought to be Yoon's supporters are now seen as Han's supporters, the president may be trying to find common ground with other factions within the conservative party by releasing their representatives. So far, such actions have not been good for the government's image.

### **Will Yoon take on the military falcons?**

From all this, we can conclude that the second move in this political game became more interesting for researchers. This was the change of the defence minister. On 12 August, [Yoon Suk Yeol appointed Kim Yeong-hyeon as the new defence minister, while Defence Minister Shin Won-sik became the national security adviser](#). Although this is technically a higher post, Shin lost direct control over the army and the ability to issue orders as a minister.

The former national security adviser, Chang Ho-jin, was appointed special adviser for foreign affairs and security.

Equally, interesting is who became the new head of the ROK Defence Ministry. Kim Yeong-hyeon is a retired three-star general. He has been head of the National Security Service since Yoon took office and oversaw the relocation of the presidential office from the former Cheong Wa Dae (Blue House) to Yongsan. Kim is believed to have become

well-versed in security and foreign policy after serving under Yoon for more than two years.

**Introducing the newly appointed security chiefs at the briefing**, presidential chief of staff Chung Jin-suk noted that Kim Young-hyun, 65, is a security expert. Prior to this, he held various positions in the Ministry of Defence and the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

According to Chung, Shin Won-sik is a general with more than 30 years of military service. He was previously vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, a member of the National Assembly and defence minister. And Chang Ho-jin, who is well versed in security issues, will focus on strategic tasks related to key national interests in his new position.

Some argue that the Presidential National Security Office has been criticised for failing to pick up on signs of rebuilding relations between North Korea and Russia, and the Ministry of National Defence has been embarrassed by leaked intelligence personnel information (we will devote a separate article to this issue shortly), but this does not explain why their leaders are being formally promoted rather than reprimanded.

This suggests that similar developments may be taking place in the South Korean military. Although at this stage the author has no evidence of a group of officers ready to start an inter-Korean conflict, the replacement of the defence minister with the head of the security service may indicate the president's desire to strengthen his influence in army circles. There may even be some purges. At the same time, the minister himself will be neutralised, as he will at least be balanced by a representative of another group.

Time will tell, but these two stories show that the internal political situation in the Republic of Korea is a rather complex and dangerous game with many strong and experienced players. Of course, the former prosecutor general is trying to manoeuvre and strengthen his position. It is still unclear what the outcome will be, but the denouement is very close.

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