

South Korea's presidential election

The bulldozer scrapes home

Aug 23rd 2007 | SEOUL
From The Economist print edition

But can Lee Myung-bak unite the conservative camp?

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TO THE tune of "Go West", a song by the Pet Shop Boys, supporters of Lee Myung-bak sang his name at a Seoul convention centre. He had just won a bitter contest to become the presidential candidate of South Korea's opposition Grand National Party (GNP). Just 1.5 percentage points separated the victorious Mr Lee from Park Guen-hye, who graciously accepted defeat, though her supporters noisily chanted allegations of fraud by Mr Lee.

The party has lost the past two presidential elections in part because conservative forces were divided. So Mr Lee's main task now is to unite the GNP for the election in December. To this end, Mr Lee said he would like Miss Park to head an election-planning committee. She has not yet responded to the overture.

Mr Lee also needs to claw back some lost popularity. He had an impressive four years as mayor of Seoul, improving the public-transport system and winning plaudits for cleaning up and beautifying the city. But his standing has since been battered by allegations that he has profited from improper property transactions.

Few observers, however, underestimate the man nicknamed the "bulldozer". Mr Lee is well placed to win in December, if only because voters are fed up with President Roh Moo-hyun's bumbling economic policies and fractious rule.

Mr Lee's life story is a mirror of the remarkable transformation of South Korea from poverty to the world's 11th-largest economy. The inspiration for two television soap operas, he saw his brother and sister killed by American bombs in the Korean War, himself suffered malnutrition and hauled rubbish in a handcart to pay for his university studies. But he was appointed chief executive of Hyundai Engineering & Construction at the age of 35, and went on to lead nine other Hyundai affiliates before entering politics.

Mr Lee has grand ambitions for South Korea. He wants it to become the world's seventh-largest economy, achieve 7% annual economic growth and see its GDP per head rise to \$40,000. Controversially, he also wants to build a 540km (340 mile) inland canal at a cost of 14 trillion won (\$15 billion) to ease road and rail congestion and bolster growth.

On relations with North Korea, Mr Lee has said that if Pyongyang gives up its nuclear weapons, South Korea and other countries should give economic assistance to lift the average annual income of its benighted people to \$3,000 in ten years. He wants to repair what he sees as the damage done by the present administration to relations with America. President Roh has pushed for a reduction in American troops and for all military forces in the country to be under South Korean command. Mr Lee maintains that, surrounded by China, Japan and Russia, South Korea cannot maintain its territorial integrity without American protection. He really does want to "Go West" as president.

