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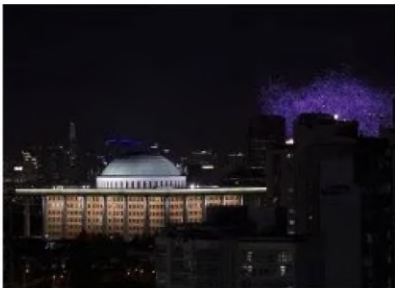
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[Two Prominent Defectors Elected to South Korean National Assembly](#)

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By **Robert R. King**

Two prominent North Korean defectors were elected to membership in South Korea's National Assembly in elections held on April 15th. This is the first time that two defectors will sit in the South Korean legislature. Thae Yong-ho was [elected](#) to represent the Gangnam District of Seoul, and Ji Seong Ho was elected on the Freedom Party group list.

Both Mr. Thae and Mr. Ji are members of the opposition United Future Party group in the Assembly. The ruling majority party group, the Democratic Party and another allied party [won](#) 180 of the 300 seats in the National Assembly, while the United Future Party and a party affiliated with it won 103 seats.

The majority of Assembly members are chosen to represent a single constituency, but in addition, some Assembly members are chosen from a party list with the number of representatives for each party group determined by the proportion of the total votes cast in the entire country for that group. The South Korean [electoral system was changed](#) before this election to give a slight advantage to smaller parties in order to encourage better representation for minority interests. Roughly two-thirds of representatives are chosen by constituencies and about one-third from party lists.

The two former North Koreans now serving in the National Assembly both have a high profile that extends well beyond the refugee community. Both are well known in South Korea, and both have international reputations.



Thae Yong-ho, one of the most prominent North Korean officials to defect to South Korea, was formerly the Deputy Chief of Mission at the North Korean Embassy in London when he successfully fled with his family in August 2016. Thae was [elected](#) to represent the Gangnam district of Seoul, which is one of the most exclusive areas of the capitol city. Gangnam has been described as the Beverly Hills of Korea, and it achieved fame well beyond Korea in 2012 when K-pop entertainer Psy released his music video “[Gangnam Style](#)” inspired by and filmed in the Gangnam District.

Thae is the most senior North Korean official to defect since [Hwang Jang-yop](#) in 1997. As the second in command of the [North Korean Embassy in London](#), Thae was heavily involved in North Korean efforts in Europe and its financial activities. He was a [highly regarded](#) diplomat. Since his defection, he has been a prominent commentator, [testifying](#) before the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee. His memoir of his time as a North Korean diplomat was a [best seller](#) in South Korea and was [praised](#) by specialists.



Ji Seong Ho escaped from North Korea by illegally crossing into China in 2006, and he has been a prominent advocate for North Korean refugees in South Korea. He grew up in the North during the devastating famine of the 1990s. When he was stealing coal to survive during the famine era, he lost consciousness from lack of food and was run over by a rail car and critically injured. He lost a leg and several fingers, which were amputated without anesthesia. He later escaped into China, almost drowning when he illegally crossed the Tumen River. He survived and crossed China with the help of brokers and religious activists. He eventually succeeded in [reaching South Korea](#).

Since arriving in South Korea, Ji has raised awareness about North Korea and sought to improve human rights in the North. He established the organization Now Action & Unity for Human Rights (NAUH), and he has supported broadcasting news and information programming to North Korea and aiding defectors.

Mr. Ji was highly visible in the United States in January 2018 when he was a guest at the first State of the Union Address of President Trump. When the president introduced him during the speech, Ji waived his crutches above his head. He also was with a group of North Korean defectors who met with the President in the oval office a few days later.

Significance of Electing Defectors to Parliament

Mr. Thae and Mr. Ji are the second and third North Korean defectors to serve in the National Assembly in Seoul. Cho Myung-chul, a North Korean defector and a former professor in the North, was the [first refugee to serve](#) as a member of the Assembly from 2012 to 2016, and he was elected on the party list. Mr. Cho was from a politically-well connected family in the North, and he taught at the Kim Il-sung University in Pyongyang. He defected to South Korea when he was visiting China in 1994. He held senior positions in the Ministry of Unification in the South before his [election to the Assembly](#).

Under South Korean law, refugees from the North are entitled to citizenship in the South when they arrive. [News reports](#) suggest that this election had a particularly high level of defector participation because of dissatisfaction with President Moon Jae-in's policy of reconciliation with the North, which has been particularly unpopular with refugees.

The defectors were not a major factor in the election results, however. The total [number of defectors](#) resettled in the South over the last two-and-a-half decades is less than 35,000. Although defectors may have been motivated to participate in the election, the numbers are still small enough they were not a major factor, even in the election of members on the party list. The defector vote had little impact on the election of Mr. Thae in the Gangnam constituency since few refugees can afford to live in that high-rent district.

Placing two individuals in favorable political position on the ballot to aid their election is a positive sign of inclusiveness on the part of South Korea's Freedom Party. These two individuals do not bring a large bloc of voters with them, but at a time when there has been criticism about treatment by the South of refugees from the North, the election of two defectors to the National Assembly is a positive and hopeful signal.

The Coronavirus and the Election

In assessing the significance of two defectors serving in the National Assembly and what that might mean about South Korean attitudes, it is important to keep in mind that the coronavirus is the [overwhelming concern](#) of people in most areas of the world today. The results of the election reflect that issue more than matters involving of defectors, foreign policy or Korean unification.

The election played out over the successful handling of the pandemic in South Korea by President Moon Jae-in, not over his policies toward North Korea or even the economy. President Moon was not on the ballot since in South Korea the presidential and parliamentary elections are on a different schedule. The next parliamentary election will be held in four years in 2024, but the next presidential election will be held in 2022. South Korean presidents serve only a single five-year term.

The positive handling of the coronavirus by the administration of President Moon was a major boost for Moon's Democratic Party. The Democratic Party and another affiliated party won 180 of the 300 seats in the National Assembly, while the opposition United Future Party and its affiliate won 103 seats. Reports called this election a "landslide."

The election result was particularly surprising since Moon has had problems over the last year with his effort to improve ties with North Korea while the North has resumed missile testing and played hard-to-get to Moon's wooing. At the same time the country was facing tough economic problems. President Moon's approval rating had fallen to 30 percent a year ago.

Seoul's handling of the coronavirus was the principal factor in the turnaround, and the South did a masterful job. As [Professor Victor Cha](#) said, South Korea's response "has become the gold standard for flattening the curve. The South Korean response—a blend of quick action and policy innovations coordinated by the national government—has proven enormously effective in containing the COVID-19 outbreak."

The Moon government's success in dealing with the coronavirus was given even greater luster when contrasted with the U.S. federal government's limping, struggling efforts to deal with the health crisis. The first coronavirus death in the United States and in South Korea occurred one day apart. Since that time, South Korea per capita has tested three times as many of its citizens as the United States, and South Korea's mortality rate is also one-third the U.S. rate.

The success of South Korea's effort to deal with the coronavirus gave Moon a major boost. In late January his approval rating was 41 percent, and at the time of the election this week it stood at 57 percent. The election results reflected Moon's approval ratings—Moon's Democratic Party won 180 of 300 seats in the National Assembly, an increase of 60 seats over the previous Assembly. Furthermore, turnout for the election was the largest in three decades.

North Korea policy was not a prominent issue in the National Assembly elections; nevertheless, the election of two North Korean defectors as Assembly Members is a positive sign that the refugees can participate fully in the political life of South Korea. That is an important message for refugees who face difficulties adjusting to life in a very different culture when they arrive in the South, but also for South Koreans. The defectors were elected with the votes of South Koreans, not other defectors.

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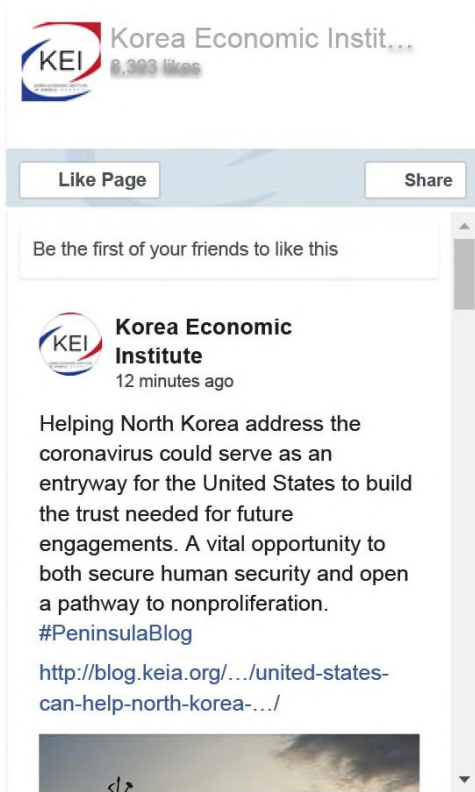
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