2012 was a ‘super election year’ in the Republic of Korea (ROK—South Korea). Every twenty years the election for the National Assembly (NA), the country’s unicameral parliament, which runs on a four-year cycle, and the country’s presidential election—ROK state presidents get elected for a non-renewable five-year term—take place in the same year.\(^1\) This was the case in 2012. While the two electoral races proved quite tight, in the end South Korea’s conservatives managed to triumph both in the parliamentary election of April 2012 and the presidential election eight months later. South Korea’s new president, 60-year old Park Geun-hye, who assumed office in February 2013, thus also possesses a majority in parliament, which should make governing easier than would have been the case otherwise—although, given the adversarial character of party politics in the ROK, some degree of parliamentary gridlock is likely to occur nonetheless. Despite earlier indications that political change was in the air, the majority of South Korean voters opted eventually for greater continuity, but only after the ruling Saenuri Party had undergone some face-lifting and had distanced itself from the increasingly unpopular incumbent president, Lee Myung-bak. Lee not only became a ‘lame duck’ in the process but also faced a slate of corruption scandals involving close associates and relatives.

\(^1\) In spring 2013, discussions about the introduction of a four-year term for the president, who would then be able to seek one further term of office, got under way. Parliamentary elections could be held concurrently with presidential ones under such a system. Earlier attempts to make relevant constitutional amendments, which require the approval of two-thirds of lawmakers and fifty percent of voters, failed—former President Roh Moo-hyun tried to effect such change (too) late during his term in office. Yet, constitutional change might be in the offing this time. In principle, all major political parties support the relevant changes, and there is also popular support.
Cronyism had in fact characterised at least some high-profile personnel decisions taken by Lee during his five years in power. In this regard, the former Chief Executive Officer and mayor of Seoul operated very much like an ‘old-style’ politician. On a broader level it can be noted that more than twenty-five years after the country’s transition to democracy, graft and corruption still remain deeply ingrained in South Korea’s political culture. The question, though, is against what benchmarks politics in South Korea should be measured. While in absolute terms, the integrity and ethical behaviour displayed by many political actors in South Korea leave much to be desired, the case can be made that in relative terms, overall levels of corruption have declined compared to the pre-democracy era and certainly pale in comparison to the situation in, say, nearby China (or North Korea for that matter). Moreover, the personal stakes of getting involved in politics have become much smaller over time. While sympathy for the North, real or perceived, might still get you into jail under the provisions of the National Security Law, political actors are overall fairly free to voice their standpoints, opinions and grievances. Protests are possible in a way that they were not in the past. Different lifestyles and orientations now get increasingly tolerated (unless you are a conscientious objector). As noted in earlier overview articles, South Korean politics are often not pretty to behold, but democracy has nonetheless become firmly embedded over the past nearly three decades.

How might Lee Myung-bak’s term in office be evaluated? The picture is arguably an ambivalent one. Against the background of former President Roh Moo-hyun’s tumultuous and politically divisive five years at the helm of the South Korean state, Lee was elected on the basis of his promise to focus on economic growth and prosperity and his image as a ‘can-do’ politician. While Lee’s administration failed to substantially boost the country’s growth rate, per-capita income and standings in global economic terms as envisioned in his ‘747’ campaign slogan, the ROK emerged quite fast and relatively unscathed out of the global financial and economic crisis of 2008/2009. Though the ROK economy certainly benefitted in this regard from sailing in the tailwind of the still buoyant Chinese economy, effective crisis management also played a role in realising this positive outcome. Per-capita income has risen somewhat over the past few years, bringing material living standards in the ROK (measured in purchasing power parity-terms) ever closer to the OECD average. The ROK now ranks