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Controversies jeopardize confirmation prospects for Lee's Cabinet nominees

By Yi Whan-woo
yistory@koreatimes.co.kr



Justice Minister nominee Kim Seung-won, left, and Gender Equality and Family Minister nominee Yong Hye-in

Two minister nominees are facing mounting questions over whether they can survive their confirmation hearings, as a series of controversies and corruption allegations have drawn growing public criticism.

If even one of them fails to pass the hearing or steps down from the nomination, it will deal a blow to President Lee Jae Myung, who hoped the Cabinet reshuffle would help him regain momentum for his policies amid falling approval ratings.

Lee nominated Kim Seung-won, a two-term lawmaker from the ruling Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) and a former judge, as his next justice minister, to oversee follow-up measures for reforms related to the prosecution and new criminal justice system, which are set to take effect Oct. 2.

Kim, however, has come under intensifying scrutiny over allegations that he improperly used his influence as a lawmaker in October 2021 to help a pharmaceutical company obtain approval for a COVID-19 drug trial.

He allegedly received a request from a broker with ties to Genencell to help speed up the approval process, after which he contacted the head of the Ministry of Food and Drug Safety about the company's application.

The clinical trial was approved about two weeks later, roughly half the usual approval period for COVID-19 drug trials at the time.

Prosecutors investigated Kim over the matter, but in December 2024 they decided to suspend indictment after confirming Kim's contact with the ministry chief but failing to establish if he received any bribes in return.

Kim has maintained that he did nothing illegal, saying he merely relayed a legitimate public complaint and did not ask regulators to give the company preferential treatment.

That defense, however, is facing fresh scrutiny after newly disclosed recordings and messages raised questions about his relationship with the broker and the nature of her requests on behalf of the company.

Questions have also grown because Genencell was later found to have submitted fabricated experiment results during the approval process. Its founder was convicted over the misconduct, although there is no evidence that Kim knew about the falsified material.

"The situation has put Kim in an awkward position, as he seeks to become the minister responsible for follow-up work on prosecution reform while facing calls from the public for prosecutors to unsuspend his indictment in light of newly disclosed evidence," said Jung Jae-hwan, a political science professor at Inha University.

Conservative civic groups have filed new criminal complaints against him, and the previous decision to suspend his indictment could be revisited if significant new evidence is uncovered.

"Any renewed investigation into Kim could raise questions over his credibility in overseeing criminal justice reform aimed at strengthening the fairness and accountability of investigations and prosecutions," Jung said.

Gender Equality and Family Minister nominee Yong Hye-in, meanwhile, is facing criticism over her intention to serve as minister while retaining her proportional representation seat in the National Assembly.

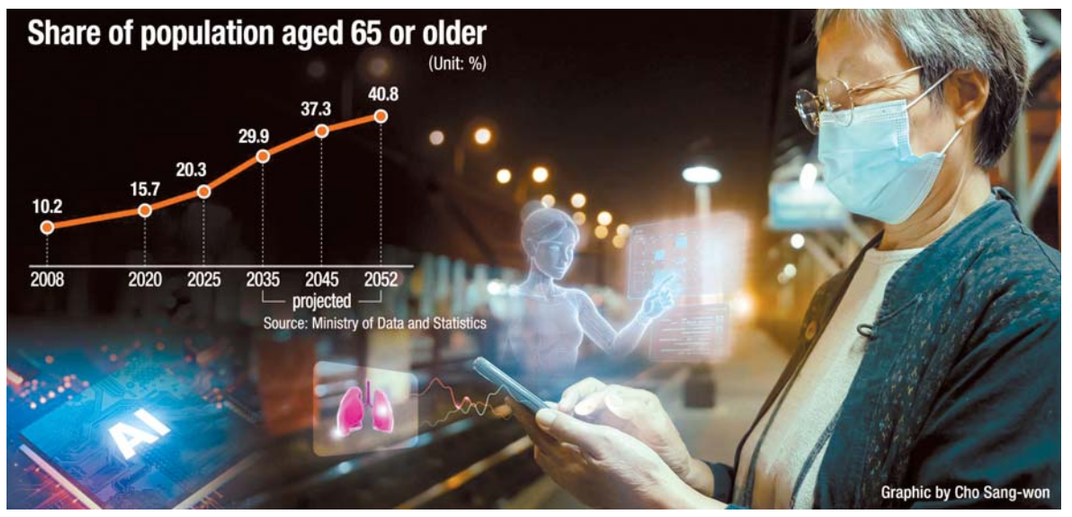
Although lawmakers are legally permitted to serve concurrently as Cabinet ministers, proportional representation lawmakers have customarily given up their seats upon joining the Cabinet because their seats can be immediately filled by the next candidate on their party list. However, the Basic Income Party has no one else on the list, meaning that giving up her seat would leave the minor progressive party with no representation in the National Assembly.

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Korea can lead in AI for older people, UN expert says

Aging, tech give Seoul both opportunity, responsibility to set global standard

By Jung Min-ho
mj6c2@koreatimes.co.kr



CoverStory



Zvezdan Pirtosek, the U.N. Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons, speaks during an interview with The Korea Times at Hotel President in Seoul, Wednesday. Courtesy of ASEM Global Ageing Center

Korea is uniquely positioned to lead global efforts to design and test more inclusive artificial intelligence (AI) systems for older people, combining its advanced technological capabilities with the world's fastest-aging population, according to a U.N. expert.

The country's rapid technological development and equally fast demographic transition give it an unusual opportunity — and responsibility — to develop an age-inclusive model that can be adopted by other countries, said Zvezdan Pirtosek, the U.N. Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons.

Korea became a super-aged society in 2025, as people aged 65 and older accounted for more than 20 percent of the population, according to the Ministry of Data and Statistics. The share is expected to continue to rise as its total fertility rate remains one of the world's lowest, at around 0.8.

"I think Korea can lead discussions about these very, very important and timely issues," he said in an interview with The Korea Times on Wednesday, adding that Korea can pioneer the development and testing of its own comprehensive AI models and policies, and that other nations "can learn a lot" from the results.

AI is entering everyday life with unprecedented speed and intensity, while aging is reshaping societies worldwide, he said. Korea faces the two trends at the same time more acutely than most countries. He called on Korea to apply a "rights before scale" principle as it expands AI-powered health care, welfare and other public services.

"I would encourage Korea to involve older persons much earlier. Too often, participation occurs when a product has already been designed and the only remaining question is whether users like it. Older persons should help define the problem, acceptable uses of data, conditions for consent and the outcomes by which success will be judged," Pirtosek said. "It is much easier to correct a problem during design or a limited pilot than after an AI system has become the main gateway to a national service."

He singled out health care, long-term care, social protection and other essential services as areas where safeguards are especially urgent. In the absence of protection, AI designed to improve people's lives could instead deepen digital exclusion, enable intrusive surveillance or reproduce age-based biases in decisions affecting older people, he said.

That concern reflects a broader debate surrounding the use of AI in aging societies. AI tools can help older people live independently, while AI-powered systems and robots can remind users to take medication, detect falls and alert family members or caregivers.

Pirtosek said the danger is that automated systems can embed assumptions or biases that are difficult for people to identify. Once an AI system becomes the routine gateway to health care, welfare or care services, such errors can be reproduced at scale and become politically difficult to reverse.

"There must be timely human review before the consequences become irreversible," said Pirtosek.

He added that Korea needs to develop legal protections, independent oversight and public understanding alongside the technology.

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ASEM forum calls for age-inclusive AI

By Jung Min-ho
mj6c2@koreatimes.co.kr

Older people should be treated as rights-holders and active participants in the development and use of artificial intelligence (AI), rather than passive beneficiaries of technology or care, experts said at an international forum in Seoul on Wednesday.

The forum, co-hosted by the ASEM Global Ageing Center, the National Human Rights Commission of Korea and the Korea office of Germany's Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, brought together experts from international organizations, academia, civil society and government to discuss the opportunities and risks AI presents for ageing societies.

Speakers said AI can help older people live independently, maintain social connections and access information and services but warned that the rapid spread of automated AI systems could also intensify age-based discrimination, digital exclusion, privacy risks and threats to individual autonomy.

"AI is already changing health care, communication, employment, banking, public services and access to information," Zvezdan Pirtosek, the U.N. Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons, said in his keynote speech. "The task before us is to make sure that technological progress strengthens human rights rather than quietly narrowing them."

AI tools can support early diagnosis, health monitoring and independent living, particularly as Korea and many other ageing societies face shortages of care workers, said Pirtosek, who is also a professor of neurology at the University of Ljubljana.

But he warned that AI systems designed to help older people could also limit their freedom when automated decisions are difficult to understand or challenge.

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Korea narrows current account surplus gap with Taiwan

By Lee Hyo-jin
lhj@koreatimes.co.kr

Korea is rapidly closing the gap with Taiwan in its current account surplus as a share of gross domestic product, with some global investment banks expecting Korea to overtake Taiwan this year, analysts said Sunday.

According to data from the Korea Center for International Finance, the average forecast from eight foreign investment banks for Korea's current account surplus as a share of GDP rose to 16 percent in August from 14.7 percent in July.

The banks are Barclays, Bank of America Merrill Lynch, Citi, Goldman Sachs, JP Morgan, HSBC, Nomura and UBS.

The increase came as several banks significantly raised their forecasts on stronger expectations for semiconductor exports. Nomura expects Korea's current account surplus to reach 19.7 percent of GDP, while Goldman Sachs projects 18.7 percent and Citi cites 18.2 percent.

The ratio shows the size of Korea's current account surplus relative to the size of its economy, allowing for comparisons between economies of different sizes.

Seven investment banks expect Taiwan's current account surplus to average 20.6 percent of GDP this year, unchanged from their July forecast. Barclays did not provide a forecast for Taiwan.

For comparison, the six banks that provided forecasts for both countries put Korea's average at 18.1 percent, compared with 21.5 percent for Taiwan.

That marks a sharp narrowing from last year, when the same six banks forecast Korea's surplus at 7 percent of GDP and Taiwan's at 17.5 percent, a gap of more than 10 percentage points.

Notably, JP Morgan expects Korea to overtake Taiwan this year, forecasting current account surpluses of 18.1 percent of GDP for Korea and 13 percent for Taiwan.

A current account surplus-to-GDP ratio approaching 20 percent would be nearly double Korea's previous high of 10.1 percent recorded in 1998, according to data from the Bank of Korea.

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NATIONAL Page 3

The government's initiative to create "10 Seoul National Universities" is facing growing backlash following the selection of three universities for concentrated funding, prompting questions over the transparency of the selection process and concerns that the initiative could create a new hierarchy among regional national universities.



CULTURE Page 12

Koo Jeong-a makes art from what people usually fail to notice: the lingering trace of scent, a glow that emerges only after darkness falls and a crystal that flashes only when a viewer happens to stand in the right place.



SPORTS Page 15

Zheng Qinwen was on her back with her arms in the air, celebrating a U.S. Open victory maybe only she believed was possible.

WEATHER in SEOUL

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