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From: Abedin, Huma <AbedinH@state.gov>
Sent: Thursday, October 13, 2011 6:50 AM
To: H
Subject: Fw: Two South Korean women seek to turn political tide (Reuters)

From: OpsNewsTicker
Sent: Thursday, October 13, 2011 06:21 AM
To: NEWS-Mahogany
Cc: SES-O_OS; SES-O_Shift-I; SES-O_Shift-II
Subject: Two South Korean women seek to turn political tide (Reuters)

SEOUL, Oct 13 (Reuters) - Two of South Korea's highest-profile women politicians kicked off a campaign on Thursday to pick the mayor of the capital Seoul, which analysts see as a litmus test of support for parliamentary and presidential elections next year.

It could also mark a departure of politics from the status quo in a country where the political and business elite has long been dominated by men.

Park Geun-hye, considered the front-runner for president in elections in December next year, met job seekers at an unemployment office in her first major campaign appearance in four years.

She was lending support for Na Kyung-won, a senior ruling Grand National Party (GNP) member of parliament who is running for Seoul mayor and is in an uphill battle against a liberal independent running on a platform heavy on welfare programmes.

Park, 59 and daughter of Park Chung-hee, often called the founder of modern South Korea, has largely stood on the sidelines since her bitter party primary defeat nearly four years ago to current President Lee Myung-bak.

But she has been under pressure to do more publicly and use her personal appeal to help the embattled GNP. The people of Seoul, who account for about a quarter of the population, go to the polls on Oct. 26 to elect a mayor.

Park has proclaimed herself as the standard-bearer of "Korean-style welfare" in her second bid for the presidency after entering politics during the 1997 Asian financial crisis.

Her approval ratings have been consistently almost triple those of her rivals, but in September, Ahn Cheol-soo, a well-known software entrepreneur who had not even declared an interest in running, suddenly racked up 20 percent.

Park has called for tax cuts for businesses to spur investment and jobs, and advocated tailored welfare programmes to encourage work for young people and boost the country's birth rate that has dropped fastest among developed economies.

"Jobs are a crucial issue that decides the happiness or misery of an entire community, not just a personal

matter for the people who are looking for work," Park said in a bustling neighbourhood of high-rises packed with technology firms.

Na, if she pulls off an upset, will be the first woman politician to hold a high-profile elected office in the country. She is trailing an independent candidate in opinion polls but her campaign believes the margin is narrowing.

Park herself maintains the lead among possible presidential candidates and political analysts see her as the most likely to succeed Lee.

"I don't believe the united opposition will have enough support to beat Park," said Jeong Han-wool of the East Asia Institute in Seoul.

Soft-spoken Park's appeal as rooted in her history of losing her parents to assassins and leading a quiet life until returning to the national stage as a politician and a party leader.

Her first lengthy public appearance in years on Thursday attracted huge crowds, even as she took lunch at a cafeteria, with staff deserting the kitchen to photograph their encounter with the country's most popular politician on their smart phones.

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