

Former dictator's daughter takes over South Korean presidency

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1 March 2013

Park Geun-hye, the daughter of former South Korean military dictator Park Chung-hee, who ruled with an iron-fist from 1961 to 1979, was officially sworn in as president on Monday. The media's promotion of her as the country's first female president only serves to distract public attention from that the fact she has taken office at a time of growing domestic social discontent and rising international tensions across East Asia.

Despite her media accolades, her approval rating has already sharply fallen below 50 percent, to just 44 percent, from a height of 56 percent in January. This is the lowest opinion poll support for any South Korean president immediately after taking office.

Her predecessor, Lee Myung-bak, from the same Saenuri Party, was deeply unpopular because of his "big market" policy of orienting toward the country's largest conglomerates or *chaebol*. Park has sought to distance herself from his record, feigning concern over rising social inequality.

In her inaugural speech, Park declared that capitalism "has been facing new challenges since the global financial crisis and has lost its way." For years, she presented herself as the Korean version of Margaret Thatcher, Britain's former "iron lady." Now, in order to head off working class unrest, she promised to build a "fair market order."

Park continued the populist rhetoric of her election campaign, calling for a more equal society. "I will usher in a new era of hope," she claimed, "whereby the happiness of each citizen becomes the bedrock of our nation's strength, which in turn is shared by and benefits all Koreans."

In reality, the corporate elite has already made clear that her election promises to spend \$35 billion on social welfare programs will never be delivered. While Park has not openly renounced her pledges, senior figures

from her party have already prepared the ground for her to abandon them. (See: "South Korean president-elect moves to abandon welfare promises")

The corporate elite is in no position to offer concessions to the working class. Economic growth slowed rapidly to just 2 percent last year, due to the deepening global slump. Moreover, Japan's aggressive policy of driving down the value of the yen has undercut South Korean auto and electronics exports in global markets.

To maintain corporate profitability, the business leaders are demanding deeper attacks on the working class. Park's real economic agenda is to produce a "Second Miracle on Han River"—a reference to her father's so-called "economic miracle" that transformed South Korea into a low-wage industrial platform in the 1970s.

While Park proclaimed her intent to promote "world-class" South Korean technology and a "creative economy," her program, in a nutshell, consists of driving up productivity at the expense of workers and, above all, to lower the cost of labour.

Park's conception of the "fair market" has nothing to do with addressing social inequality. It seeks to redistribute wealth within the corporate elite. Sections of the non-chaebol business elite long complained that President Lee's administration exclusively favoured the chaebol. Park insisted she would implement policies so that small and medium-sized businesses "can prosper alongside large companies."

The new president called for a return to the "compassionate conservatism" of her father's era. There was nothing compassionate for the working people about her father's dictatorship. Rather, the slogan is a warning that her rule will also be based on the same ruthless suppression of working class

resistance, including by the National Intelligence Service—the successor to the notorious Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) set up by her father.

Park will not hesitate to follow her father’s use police-state methods. In the past, she has echoed her father’s contempt for the right to strike, and for any action by workers to defend their interests, as “self-serving” and “illegal.”

Her administration includes former officials from her father’s military dictatorship. Suh Seoung-hwan, nominated to head the Land and Transportation Ministry, is the son of former defense minister Suh Jong-cheol, who participated in the 1961 military coup and served under Park Chung-hee in the 1970s. Huh Tae-yeol, named the presidential chief of staff, worked on Park senior’s staff.

Others include Kim Byung-kwan, the nominee for defense minister, who is known to carry a small portrait of the former dictator. While the opposition Democratic United Party has sought to block his appointment by pointing to allegations of corruption involving military contracts, the appointments as a whole raise far more serious questions about a return to the methods of Park’s father.

During the election campaign, Park had also distanced herself from Lee’s deeply unpopular hard-line stance toward North Korea, and promised to try to improve relations with the North. But that was always premised on the demand that Pyongyang abandon its nuclear programs and support for the Obama administration’s “pivot” to Asia.

In her inaugural speech, she again pledged to “lay the groundwork for an era of harmonious unification” with the North and “move forward step-by-step on the basis of creditable deterrence to build trust between the South and the North.” However, she left the door open to a sharp turn toward confrontation with Pyongyang, by declaring: “I will not tolerate any action that threatens the lives of our people and the security of our nation.”

Following North Korea’s third nuclear test last month, sections of the ruling elite have already renewed calls for the acquisition of nuclear weapons. Former President Lee stated in mid-February that although he did not believe the South needed nuclear weapons at this time, he “respects the patriotism of those who demand the South’s own nuclear armament, as it would send a warning to China and North Korea.”

In a meeting with US military officials on February 22, Park reaffirmed Seoul’s commitment to Washington, describing it as “a blood alliance” that “fought to keep the South’s liberal democracy during the Korean War.” Far from defending “liberal democracy,” US imperialism fought to defend the authoritarian regime of Syngman Rhee from 1948 to 1960, and then backed the outright dictatorship imposed after Park Chung-hee’s 1961 military coup.

Under pressure from big business to attack the working class, amid rising geo-political tensions in North East Asia, far from heralding a new Korean economic miracle, Park’s presidency will be a period of political turmoil and social upheavals.



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