

# Mass protests call on Korean president to resign

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Up to 200,000 people demonstrated in the South Korean capital on Saturday to demand President Park Geun-hye resign, according to protest organisers. Park is accused of allowing her personal confidante Choi Soon-sil to be involved in deciding policy matters despite holding no formal government position. Park's approval rating has fallen to a mere 5 percent, the lowest of any South Korean president.

Like last week's demonstration which involved 20,000 people, the protestors included a wide range of workers, both Korean and foreign, as well as middle, high school and university students and other youth. The participation of young people is significant in South Korea where they are often prevented from having any voice in politics. More protests are planned for next week.

"I am mad that an unelected individual ruled the country behind the scenes. It is a regression of the democracy that we have learned about," Cho Ji-hun, an 18-year-old student told the *Korea Herald*. "I thought I would regret it if I did nothing in this seriously sad situation." Others denounced the president's recent apologies over the matter as meaningless.

Park has maintained her innocence whilst apologizing for the scandal. In a speech Friday she said: "I feel sorry and miserable that a specific individual derived benefits in the process of key state projects, the purpose of which was to improve the nation's economy and the people's lives." It was her second apology in 10 days.

Park also stated that both she and her secretariat would cooperate in an investigation now underway. However, an official involved with the probe told the media, "Nothing is decided yet on [when to start] questioning the president, as our priority is currently on fact-finding." Justice Minister Kim Hyun-woong (Kim Hyeon-ung) previously said that the president was

legally protected from being questioned.

Two recently-sacked presidential secretaries—An Jong-beom and Jeong Ho-seong—were questioned on Sunday, following their formal arrests. An has been accused of working with Choi, to pressure companies to donate nearly 80 billion won (\$US72 million) to Mir and K-Sports, two non-profit organizations established under suspicious circumstances. The money was allegedly used as a slush fund, with some of it going towards Park's retirement and for real estate speculation. Jeong has been accused of providing government documents to Choi.

Choi was also formally arrested on Thursday and has been questioned for several days. She has been charged with abuse of authority, raising suspicions that the accusation is designed to protect the president. Unlike bribery, abuse of authority does not require third party involvement. It also comes with a lighter sentence should she be found guilty. Her lawyer has also maintained her innocence.

South Korea's political elite are attempting to restrict the widespread public anger to Park alone and away from the broader crisis now engulfing the national economy in line with other countries around the world. Corruption goes beyond Park in a country where scandals are regularly used to force political changes and settle scores.

The opposition parties, led by the Minjoo Park of Korea (MPK), have all focused on demanding Park resign. On Thursday, MPK lawmakers made their first call for the president to quit. "Park's prolonged rule will bring extreme confusion, leaving the country in a deadlock. The people will become victims," a statement from six MPK representatives declared. "There will be disaster if Park does not step down and continues to cling to her remaining term in office."

These comments echoed those of the minor Justice Party, which postures as a left-wing alternative to the MPK. Ahn Cheol-soo of the People's Party and a potential presidential candidate in next year's election has also called for Park's resignation. The South Korean president is constitutionally limited to one, five-year term with Park's term ending in February 2018.

While the anti-Park faction in her own Saenuri Party continues to call for the party leadership to step down, those close to Park have resisted, stating that the scandal should be resolved before any changes occur.

Park's longtime involvement with Choi and her father Choi Tae-min, a cult leader who befriended Park following her mother's assassination in 1974, is well known in Seoul and Washington.

Park was criticized for her involvement with the elder Choi, who died in 1994, during a bitter factional fight with Lee Myung-bak in the 2007 presidential primary. A 2007 document released by WikiLeaks in 2011 from then-US ambassador to South Korea Alexander Vershbow, stated: "Rumors are rife that the late pastor [Choi Tae-min] had complete control over Park's body and soul during her formative years and that his children accumulated enormous wealth as a result."

While the political establishment and media have focused on the religious nature of the case, it was already known that the younger Choi had been profiting from her relationship with Park.

The political calculations run far deeper than a simple corruption scandal. Park has lost the confidence of the ruling elites in Seoul as well as Washington. She has been unable to force through so-called labor reform measures demanded by the conglomerates that control the economy amid declining growth.

When questioned on Friday about US President Obama's position on Park, White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest pointedly declined to support Park, saying "that the alliance between the United States and South Korea is a close alliance, it's a strong alliance, and it's one that is strong today as it's been. And one of the hallmarks of a strong alliance is that it remains durable, even when different people and different personalities are leading the countries."

During her presidency Park has tried to draw closer to China, joining the Beijing-led Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) against US wishes and appearing at a military parade in China's capital

alongside Xi Jinping and Russia's Vladimir Putin in September 2015. The image of a US ally alongside the two biggest targets of American imperialism will have raised concerns in Washington.

The lack of any US support for the embattled Park is a clear warning to any future South Korean administration to line up unequivocally behind Washington's "pivot to Asia" against China.



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