One million protestors in Seoul demand Korean president resign

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Another mass protest occurred in Seoul on Saturday as the streets were filled with hundreds of thousands of people denouncing President Park Geun-hye and demanding she resign. It was the largest demonstration since June 1987, when military dictator Chun Doo-hwan was forced to allow open presidential elections at the end of his term in office.

All factions of the South Korean political establishment are maneuvering to find a way to get Park out of office in order to head off the deep-seated social discontent that is the root cause of the mass opposition to President Park.

While no formal charges have been levelled against Park, she has been accused of allowing a personal confidante, Choi Soon-sil, to decide policy matters. Choi, who held no actual position in the government, ran a suspected slush fund for Park.

Protest organizers estimate there were one million people at Gwanghwamun Square, while the more conservative police estimate was 260,000. Many held signs reading or chanted, “Step down Park Geun-hye!” and “You are surrounded! Park Geun-hye, come out and surrender!”

The protests have remained peaceful though upwards of 25,000 police officers were stationed alongside water cannons and walls of police buses to prevent marchers from moving toward Cheongwadae, the presidential residence.

Like previous protests, a wide range of people participated, from students in school uniforms to parents with their young children, retirees and an estimated 150,000 unionised workers. Foreign workers have had a presence at each of the protests, an indication of the international character of Seoul and the broad impact that the scandal has had on non-Korean workers.

Tens of thousands also gathered in cities around the country, including 35,000 in Busan, 10,000 in Gwangju, and 5,000 in Jeju. Park is expected to make a third public address on the matter soon.

Another demonstration in Seoul is planned for November 26. The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions and the Federation of Korean Trade Unions, the country’s largest union federations, have threatened a general strike if Park does not resign.

Student Lee Hyeon-a, 16, told the *Korea Herald* on Saturday: “I am participating in a rally for the first time. I am taking this opportunity to take more interest in politics so that my voice matters in the society.”

Lee Gi-beom, a 20-year-old student at Kwangwoon University, stated: “I feel this may be similar to the democratic uprising in the 1980s. A historic moment. This scandal has just reinforced the fact that the government is incompetent. It has definitely raised anger among youth.”

The anger felt by people throughout South Korea, and in Korean communities abroad where protests have occurred, is understandable. But the scandal surrounding Park is not the result of incompetence or even corruption itself. It is the South Korean ruling class’ response to the deepening economic crisis. Neither the ruling Saenuri Party nor the opposition Minjoo Party of Korea (MPK or Democratic Party), the People’s Party, or minor Justice Party have any answers to declining economic conditions and rising unemployment.

Saturday’s rally was organized by approximately 1,500 civic groups, many with ties to the MPK, whose leadership took part in the rally. “If President Park continues to ignore the people’s demands and orders, the Democratic Party will stage a full-blown campaign for the ousting of the administration,” said MPK leader

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Choo Mi-ae. Presidential hopefuls in next year's election, Moon Jae-in and Seoul mayor Park Won-soon, were also present.

Investigators in the Choi Soon-sil case expect to question Park on Tuesday or Wednesday and will ask about her involvement in pressuring corporations to donate money to Mir and K-Sports, two nonprofits run by Choi. Park has been accused of using the money as a slush fund for her retirement. An Jong-beom, a former presidential secretary, told prosecutors the two foundations were set up on the president's "direct orders." Park has been summoned as a witness, not a suspect.

On Sunday, 80 Saenuri lawmakers and leaders, led by the party's anti-Park faction, called for the disbanding of the party as a way of deflecting public anger from the conservatives. Parties in South Korea are often renamed or reorganized in the wake of scandals, protests or electoral debacles.

Kim Mu-seong, a leading conservative who is opposed to Park, called for impeachment, saying: "The reason why it is so hard to address the problem is because the president is standing at the center of a constitutional violation, as opposed to protecting the constitution. The people's cries yesterday were their judgment on the president."

Impeachment requires two-thirds approval of the National Assembly. While the opposition controls 165 seats out of 300, at least 30 Saenuri lawmakers would be needed.

Some within the MPK have called for Park's resignation, but the party has not formally demanded Park's impeachment. For all the bluster at Saturday's demonstration, the opposition previously sought to provide Park with a way out that left her as president. Last week, the MPK demanded Park accept a so-called neutral cabinet, with a prime minister selected by the National Assembly. The president would lose a great deal of power, but remain in office.

Many from both the conservatives and opposition have also demanded that Park leave the Saenuri Party.

Now, however, the MPK is calling for a plan to provide Park with a peaceful means of resignation. The People's Party and Justice Party have been more forceful in calling for Park's removal and are demanding Park's impeachment. The Justice Party postures as a left-wing alternative to the MPK.

The deep-seated popular anger against Park is not the result of one scandal. Park's administration has dealt with a series of issues since she came to office, all of which have generated hostility toward her. These include the involvement of South Korea's intelligence agency, the National Intelligence Service, in the election that brought her to office; the mishandling of the sinking of the Sewol ferry in 2014, killing mostly high school students; attacks on political parties and unions; labor casualization; deployment of a US anti-ballistic missile system; and mass layoffs in the ship building and shipping industries.

None of the issues facing the working class or youth in South Korea will be solved if Park steps down or is removed from office. All the opposition parties, as well as the anti-Park faction in the ruling party, are diverting the widespread discontent in the hope of shoring up their own support bases ahead of next year's presidential election.

Regardless of who wins the election, the winner will continue to push through the demands of big business and Washington.

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