

Nearly two million people demand South Korean president's removal

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Approximately 1.5 million people demonstrated in South Korea's capital Saturday, demanding the removal of President Park Geun-hye. Demonstrations in other cities brought the total number of participants to 1.9 million. About 100,000 people took part in Busan, South Korea's second largest city. An additional 50,000 people gathered in Gwangju and 20,000 in Daegu.

It was the fifth and largest weekly protest to date since allegations of corruption emerged in September surrounding the president and her personal confidante, Choi Soon-sil. Counting all the protests around the country, the rallies were the largest in South Korea's history.

In Seoul, the protesters again filled Gwanghwamun Square in Seoul and marched within 200 meters of Cheongwadae, the presidential residence, while chanting "Park Geun-hye, resign!" They also carried placards reading "Arrest President Park" and "Surrender Now." The protest was organized by 1,500 civic groups, many of which have close ties to the Democrats and other official opposition parties.

The immediate scandal involves accusations that Park allowed Choi Soon-sil, who holds no government post, to be involved in deciding policy matters and to solicit funds from corporations for companies that she effectively controlled. This affair is bound up with rifts in South Korean ruling circles, including Park's own Saenuri Party.

However, the demonstrations also reflect broader popular opposition to her administration's attacks on working-class conditions and basic democratic and social rights, including a drive to casualize the workforce, cut jobs, and privatize state-owned industries.

For many people, these are the first protests they have

ever attended. Students from middle schools, high schools, and universities continued to take part in large numbers. Chang Hae-jin, an 18-year-old high school senior, told the media: "This is my first time participating in a rally. When I was studying for the (college entrance) exam, I was sorry because I could not do anything. Park should not hide like this. She should be honest about her wrongdoings."

Parents also continued to bring their children. Jung Young-hoon, a 36-year-old father of two, told the *Korea Herald*: "It is difficult to take care of my children on the street during the rally, especially because of the weather, but it is peaceful, so it's okay. I had to come to show them this is democracy."

Significantly, protestors' demands are beginning to go beyond the status of the president. As of last Friday, the student unions at 13 universities had decided to boycott classes while an additional 10 are expected to join them this week. Students at Korea University have occupied the school's main building since Thursday to denounce the chancellor's future plans, which include eliminating one of the university's departments and raising tuition fees.

At Seoul National University students have occupied the administration building for a month to oppose privatization plans. The president of the student body, Lee Tak-gyu, said students would join the class boycott on November 30.

Demonstrators are also once more taking aim at the Park administration's decision to revise history textbooks for middle and high schools. The government is attempting to re-write the books to whitewash the crimes of conservative leaders and dictators, including Park's father, General Park Chung-hee.

Cho Seong-hun, 21, a student at Myongji University, said: "Students are taking to the streets as they are

angry about Park's policies, including a government-authored history textbook." He added, reflecting the struggle young people face to find employment: "I am majoring in library and information science. Most graduates become librarians, and it's getting more and more difficult to get a permanent job."

According to Lee Jun-hyup of the Hyundai Research Institute, one in three youth, those between the ages of 15 and 29 years-old, could be considered unemployed. The real unemployment rate for all workers stands at 10 percent, including those who have given up looking for work or are in part-time jobs involuntarily.

For now, however, the protests have not gone beyond the confines established by the opposition parties, led by the Minjoo Party of Korea (MPK). These bourgeois parties are attempting to divert the public anger into support for their own campaigns, particularly for the presidential election scheduled for next year, and quell discontent over the growing social crisis.

Democrats and conservatives have the same aim. While Chu Mi-ae and Moon Jae-in of the MPK again took part in Saturday's rally, right-wing politicians also joined, including Nam Gyeong-pil, the governor of Gyeonggi Province who recently left the ruling Saenuri Party, and former Seoul mayor Oh Se-hun.

The MPK and its allies, the People's Party and Justice Party, as well as the anti-Park faction of the Saenuri Party have formed a de facto alliance, backing the president's removal. The opposition intends to propose an impeachment bill this Wednesday, with a vote as early as Friday and no later than December 9. "Saenuri must promptly cooperate with the impeachment move that the three opposition parties have agreed to," said Representative Chu Mi-ae, the MPK leader, appealing to those who still back Park or who may waver at the thought of breaking with their party.

Nam Gyeong-pil, a potential presidential candidate who openly supports South Korea obtaining nuclear weapons, stated at a recent news conference: "The impeachment motion should be done by December 9. If it pointlessly drags on, the people's patience will reach its limit." In other words, if Park is not removed soon, the protestors could begin advancing demands that none of the parties are willing to meet.

For the impeachment bill to pass, it requires a two-thirds vote of the 300-seat National Assembly.

Assuming that all opposition and independent lawmakers vote in favor, it would still need the support of at least 28 lawmakers from the Saenuri Party. According to Yonhap News Agency, some 40 Saenuri lawmakers may vote for its approval.

If the bill succeeds, Park would remain president, but her official duties would be transferred to Prime Minister Hwang Gyo-an. The Constitutional Court would then examine the case. If six out of the nine justices support the charges against her, Park would be removed as president and a new election would be held within 60 days. The court proceedings could drag on for weeks. In 2004, the Constitutional Court took 63 days to dismiss impeachment charges against President Roh Moo-hyun (No Mu-hyeon).

According to media polls, Park's approval rating has fallen to 4 percent, the lowest of any South Korean president. She is expected to deliver another public apology this week, but has shown no signs of willingly giving up her office.

Support for the Saenuri Party has fallen to 12 percent. The pro-Park faction comprises about 68 lawmakers out of the 128 conservative party members in the National Assembly. The faction recently boycotted a party meeting to discuss the impeachment procedures.

The author also recommends:

South Korean opposition parties call for President Park's impeachment
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