

South Korean president offers to resign

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South Korean President Park Geun-hye delivered a short, five-minute speech on Tuesday, three days after one of the largest mass rallies in South Korean history demanded her removal from office. The president suggested she was willing to resign in the future but the official opposition parties rejected the offer as an attempt to delay an impending impeachment vote.

“I will leave all decisions, including the shortening of my presidential term, up to the National Assembly,” Park said. It was her third such national address since becoming embroiled in a political scandal in late September. “Once the ruling and opposition parties draw up a measure to stably turn over the reins of government, I will step down from the office in line with that timetable and legal procedures.”

Park refused to answer questions from the press after her speech, which included another public apology for the scandal that will do little to dispel the public’s anger.

It has become increasingly unlikely that Park will finish her term in office, which is officially due to end in February 2018. All three opposition parties—the Minjoo Party of Korea (MPK, or Democrats), the People’s Party and the Justice Party—are proceeding with the president’s impeachment, backed by members of the anti-Park faction of her ruling conservative Saenuri Party. Even the pro-Park faction has begun to call for her to resign “honorably.”

Led by the MPK, the opposition is planning to vote on impeachment tomorrow. “When unconditional resignation is the only way to normalize state affairs, the president did not mention it and instead shifted the responsibility onto the National Assembly. It is a mere strategy to disturb the ongoing move toward impeachment,” MPK chairwoman Chu Mi-ae said. This sentiment was echoed by Park Ji-won and Sim Sang-jeong, leaders of the People’s Party and Justice Party respectively.

Until her speech, the opposition had been confident it had enough votes to secure Park’s impeachment, as they control 172 seats in the National Assembly, which includes seven independents. To impeach Park, they need only 28 Saenuri Party members to back the motion to secure the two-thirds majority necessary in the 300-seat body. If the impeachment resolution passed, the Constitutional Court would then examine the case, where six out of nine justices would have to approve Park’s removal from office.

However, since Park’s speech, Saenuri Party members, including from the anti-Park faction, have called for negotiations over her possible resignation. While 40 conservative lawmakers were likely to support impeachment, divisions have emerged in the anti-Park faction’s ranks, according to one of its leaders, Hwang Yeong-cheol.

“Just because [the ruling and opposition parties] don’t reach an agreement doesn’t mean that we’ll delay or reject the impeachment schedule itself. We need to do our best [to reach an agreement] before December 9,” Hwang stated, in an indication that they are trying to push back the vote to next week.

Saenuri Party floor leader Jeong Jin-seok, who belongs to the pro-Park faction, stated: “The talks over the impeachment have proceeded so far on the assumption that Park would not step down. But now that the situation has changed, I will discuss the process with the opposition parties from square one.”

If the impeachment vote passed, Park would remain president but her duties would be suspended and handed over to Prime Minister Hwang Gyo-an until the Constitutional Court reached a decision. If she were removed from office, a presidential election would be held within 60 days.

Park has also attempted to stall proceedings by expressing support for a special investigation council, which is expected to begin its work next week. On

Wednesday, she selected Park Yeong-su, a lawyer recommended by the opposition, to lead the council. The president claimed through a spokesman she would “fully cooperate with the team’s investigation, including face-to-face questioning.”

However, Park has reneged previously on promises to cooperate with the current prosecution team investigating the scandal surrounding her and long-time friend Choi Soon-sil. Choi has been indicted on charges related to soliciting bribe money from corporations and being involved in deciding policy matters despite holding no formal government position.

Mass demonstrations are also set to continue. Another protest in Seoul is scheduled for this Saturday, following last week’s rallies, where 1.5 million people gathered in the capital alone. The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) held a so-called general strike on Wednesday to allow workers to let off steam, with 60,000 workers rallying around the country, including 22,000 in Seoul.

All the opposition parties are exploiting the public hostility to Park to position their candidates ahead for the next presidential election. They reflect the interests of sections of big business, which are increasingly dissatisfied with Park’s inability to force through attacks on working conditions. These so-called labor reforms would lead to the increased casualization of the workforce and the slashing of wages.

The *Wall Street Journal* noted in October that neither the MPK nor the People’s Party is “fundamentally opposed to reforms, and both are likely to propose their own variations on labor reform as the December 2017 presidential election draws near.” The Justice Party, which poses as a left-wing alternative, as well as the unions in the KCTU and Federation of Korean Trade Unions, regularly line up with the Democrats.

The widespread anger of ordinary working people toward Park is an expression, in the first instance, of the outrage felt over her administration’s alleged corrupt practices and its contempt for basic legal and democratic norms. At the same time, it reflects broader concerns about the decline of living conditions as a result of the sustained attack on jobs, working conditions and the country’s limited social services by both Saenuri and Democrat-led administrations.

The opposition’s drive to remove Park is an attempt to funnel that frustration and anger into support for

their presidential election campaigns. None of the economic and social issues will be resolved however as the Democrats, no less than the conservatives, are responsible for the social crisis that workers and youth face today.



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