

South Korean opposition sets presidential impeachment vote for Friday

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For the sixth consecutive weekend of protests, millions of South Koreans gathered Saturday at over 100 locations around the country to demand President Park Geun-hye resign immediately in the wake of a scandal surrounding her longtime adviser Choi Soon-sil. In total, 2.3 million people took part in the protests, making them the largest in South Korea's history.

The rally in Seoul was the biggest, with 1.7 million demonstrating in Gwanghwamun Square. The protestors marched within 100 meters of Cheongwadae, the presidential residence, chanting, "Park Geun-hye, step down immediately. It is the public's order" and "Arrest Park Geun-hye." It was the closest the protestors had so far been allowed to go. Some 200,000 people protested in Busan and 100,000 gathered in Gwangju.

Much of the anger was directed at Park's speech last Tuesday, her third public address on the matter, in which she claimed she would resign if the National Assembly came up with a plan for an orderly transfer of power. "President Park is delaying stepping down, leaving the decision on her own presidency up to the parliament," Kim Seong-ju, 27, told the *Korea Herald*. "That way, she is sparking infighting in the National Assembly. We (the public) have no option but to topple the president ourselves."

Many demonstrators rejected the president's vague offer as a means of avoiding impeachment. "I think Park's third televised address was a sophisticated political ploy. Now, the public fury, which was directed at President Park and her confidante Choi Soon-sil, spreads to the National Assembly," Seo Yeong-su, 23, said.

In addition, 20,000 people protested in front of the headquarters of the ruling Saenuri Party in Yeouido, Seoul for the first time, with demonstrators chanting,

"Dissolve the Saenuri Party." There is anger toward the conservative party after lawmakers in its anti-Park faction backtracked last week from pledges to vote for the president's impeachment.

At a designated time during the Gwanghwamun rally, the participants extinguished the candles many were holding and chanted "Resign, Park Geun-hye." Lights were also turned off in nearby buildings, including at the US embassy, an indication that Park has lost the support of Washington. At a briefing on November 29, press secretary Josh Earnest said President Barack Obama had not been in contact with Park since the scandal broke. When asked how the situation in South Korea would affect the "pivot to Asia," Earnest stressed that the alliance with Seoul would continue regardless of who is in office.

While the main focus of the rallies continues to be Park's removal, people are also denouncing the chaebols, the huge family-owned conglomerates that control South Korea's economy. Some protestors stated, "The chaebols are responsible!" while calling for their dissolution. Participants held posters, for example, mocking Hyundai Motors chairman Chung Mong-koo (Jeong Mong-gu) after it became known the company gave money to the foundations controlled by Choi Soon-sil. According to the allegations, the chaebols offered the money as bribes, which Choi then funneled to Park's inner circle.

In the National Assembly, the opposition parties—the Minjoo (Democratic) Party of Korea (MPK), the People's Party, and the minor Justice Party—rejected Park's call to set a time frame for her resignation. However, a planned vote on an impeachment motion for December 2 fell through as fissures appeared in the anti-Park faction of the Saenuri Party, which previously backed Park's removal.

In order to achieve the two-thirds majority needed to approve impeachment in the 300-seat National Assembly, at least 28 Saenuri Party representatives must vote with the opposition. However, following Park's speech on Tuesday, it became unclear if the necessary votes could be obtained.

On Thursday, the Saenuri Party officially recommended Park leave office in April so that a presidential election could be held in June. The timetable for doing so was approved unanimously by lawmakers. The *JoongAng Ilbo* reported that from among 31 Saenuri Party lawmakers who had supported impeachment, 21 would change their positions if Park agreed to resign. This includes Kim Mu-seong, a potential presidential candidate who previously claimed he would give up those ambitions to focus on Park's impeachment.

The president is also holding talks with both the pro- and anti-Park factions in the conservative party in the hopes of avoiding impeachment, but there seems little chance of her remaining in office. "[The early resignation of Park] is the most rational plan for us," said Saenuri floor leader Jeong Jin-seok. The party has called for negotiations with the opposition in order to organize Park's orderly exit.

Citing the shifting winds, the People's Party decided to delay the vote, which also drew the public's ire. In response, the opposition said it would vote for impeachment on December 9, regardless of any plans for Park's resignation. "There will be no faltering in our commitment to impeaching Park," said the parties in a joint statement. "We were supposed to see Park suspend her duties today [December 2], but apologize for failing to uphold the people's resolution."

The opposition plans to put forward the impeachment motion to the full National Assembly on Thursday and vote on it the next day. By law, such a measure must be voted on within 72 hours. The anti-Park faction has stated it will vote for impeachment if the president does not make her resignation plans clear by 6 p.m. on Wednesday.

If the motion passes, Park's duties will be suspended and Prime Minister Hwang Gyo-an would become acting president. The Constitutional Court would then have 180 days to deliberate. If at least six of nine justices support the charges, Park would be removed from office. A new presidential election would be held

within 60 days.

The charges against Park include allegations that she allowed Choi Soon-sil to take part in governmental matters despite holding no formal office, extorted bribe money from corporations, failed to protect the lives of those killed when the Sewol ferry sank in April 2014, and tried to pressure the *Segye Ilbo* newspaper to replace its CEO after it ran a story on the scandal.



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