

South Korean President Park impeached

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South Korea's National Assembly yesterday voted to impeach President Park Geun-hye, the first step in her removal from office. The vote of 234 to 56 in the 300-member Assembly was well over the necessary two-thirds required and indicated that significant sections of Park's own right-wing Saenuri Party supported the impeachment.

The impeachment follows weeks of massive protests involving millions of people demanding Park resign over a scandal involving her close personal confidante, Choi Soon-sil. Although she holds no official position in the government, Choi allegedly influenced its decisions, was privy to classified documents and used her ties with Park to solicit donations from South Korean companies.

The protests—the largest in South Korea's history—reflect widespread hostility and anger towards Park over broader issues: the deepening gulf between rich and poor as well as her administration's anti-democratic methods in silencing critics, disbanding an opposition party and suppressing strikes.

After the vote, Park apologised once again for the “grave national turmoil” that her “carelessness and shortcomings” had produced, but gave no indication that she would resign. Park has been named as a criminal suspect in legal proceedings involving the Choi scandal but she cannot be indicted while in office.

Following yesterday's Assembly vote, presidential authority and duties have been transferred to Prime Minister Hwang Gyo-an who becomes acting president. The impeachment case now goes to the Constitutional Court which has six months to decide if the charges against Park warrant her removal from power.

Six of the nine justices must support Park's dismissal which would be followed by a fresh presidential election within two months. Six of the judges were appointed by Park and her immediate predecessor Lee Myung-bak, also from the Saenuri Party. However, a

court decision to keep Park in office would likely reignite the protest movement and plunge the country into even deeper crisis.

Park's impeachment reflects deep divisions within the South Korean ruling elite as well as intense public alienation from the entire political establishment. Yonsei University professor Moon Chung-in told the *Financial Times* last month: “South Korea is in a state of total crisis. We have intertwined political, geo-political and economic crises... and no leadership to mend the fractures or drive society.”

Park, like other Asian leaders, has attempted to balance between China, which is South Korea's largest trading partner, and the US, which is a long-time military ally. South Korea hosts key American military bases and currently nearly 30,000 US troops. Park, who came to office in 2013, sought to improve relations with China and earned US displeasure when she appeared last year at a military parade in Beijing alongside Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Significantly the Obama administration offered no support to the embattled Park. The US embassy even signaled sympathy for the protests in Seoul by turning its lights off along with other nearby buildings at a time fixed by protest leaders. State Department spokesman Mark Toner declared yesterday that the United States “is there with Korea as it undergoes this political change and transition”—thereby tacitly accepting that Park would be removed.

At the same time, under pressure from Washington, the Park administration agreed in July to the US deployment of a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-missile system to South Korea, angering Beijing. While nominally directed against North Korea, the THAAD installation on the Korean Peninsula is part of the US military build-up throughout Asia in preparation for war against China.

The election of Donald Trump as US president has further heightened the dilemmas confronting the South Korean ruling elites. According to the *Financial Times*, financial officials in Seoul in the wake of Trump's election win "directed banks to prepare for external shocks, while the Blue House [presidential residence] convened a national security council session."

Although Trump told Park following his election win that he agreed "100 percent" with the US-South Korea alliance, he threatened, in the course of his campaign, to withdraw from the alliance if South Korea did not pay more towards US military bases. Despite Trump's reassurance, he has placed a question mark over the alliance that can only compound uncertainty in Seoul and exacerbate divisions within the ruling elites over South Korea's strategic orientation.

Trump's extreme economic nationalism is also destabilising South Korean politics. He has declared that he will tear up the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) and threatened trade war measures against China that would heavily impact on the South Korean economy. While South Korea is not part of the TPP, Trump has also criticised South Korea's free trade agreement with the US as unfair on American businesses.

Trump's stance is encouraging opposition parties—the Minjoo (Democratic) Party, People's Party and Justice Party—to ramp up their calls for protectionism. The Democrats strongly opposed the free trade agreement with the US and, along with other opposition parties, have been seeking to channel popular opposition in an economic nationalist direction. Trade unions and farmers groups have taken part in the anti-Park protests to demand trade restrictions and government subsidies for products such as rice.

The South Korean economy is stagnating with the latest OECD forecast putting growth for 2017 at just 2.6 percent. Exports, which comprise about 45 percent of the country's GDP, shrank by 3.2 percent year-on-year in October after a 5.9 percent drop in September. Hanjin Shipping, which was once South Korea's largest shipping company, declared bankruptcy in August. Household debt exploded to a record \$1.15 trillion by mid-year—the eighth highest in the world.

Rising levels of poverty and unemployment, particularly among young people, are fuelling social discontent which the opposition parties are seeking to exploit. None of them, however, can offer any solutions

to the social crisis. In fact, the Democrat presidents—Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun—made deep inroads in the living conditions of the working class by breaking up the life-long employment system and opening the door for the mass casualisation of the workforce.

An article in *Bloomberg* on Thursday likened the protests calling for Park's resignation to political upheavals around the world, stating: "The wave of populism that fueled Brexit, the rise of Donald Trump and the fall of Italian leader Matteo Renzi has reached South Korea, where street protesters see Friday's parliamentary vote to impeach President Park Geun-hye as a step towards toppling the establishment she symbolises."

The opposition parties are also seeking to capitalise on growing fears of war. The Minjoo Party criticised but did not oppose the installation of the THAAD anti-ballistic missile system which makes South Korea a target in any war between the US and China. The People's Party and Justice Party opposed the move on economic grounds, reflecting fears in business circles of economic retaliation by China.

The political turmoil in Seoul is raising fears in Washington that Park's removal could result in a win by an opposition presidential candidate who would adopt a more moderate stance towards North Korea and China. Such an administration might limit US military involvement in South Korea and could adopt protectionist measures.



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