

Impeachment trial of South Korean president begins

Ben McGrath
5 January 2017

The first public hearing in the impeachment trial of South Korean President Park Geun-hye took place Tuesday, but with the defendant a no-show, the proceedings lasted only nine minutes. Oral arguments are set to begin at another hearing Thursday, but Park is again likely to not attend. The Constitutional Court, which oversees impeachment proceedings, has narrowed down the charges against the president from 13 to five.

Park has been accused of allowing her friend and confidante Choi Soon-sil to take part in deciding policy matters despite holding no formal position in government, using Choi and presidential aides to pressure large companies like Samsung to offer bribes, infringing on the media's free speech, abusing power, and neglecting her duties in relation to the sinking of the Sewol ferry in April 2014, which killed 304 people, mostly high school students.

The Constitutional Court is composed of nine judges led by Park Han-cheol, who stated on Tuesday, "We will do our best to conduct a strict and fair review of the impeachment case." On Thursday, the Court is expected to hear testimony from key witnesses such as former presidential secretaries An Bong-geun and Lee Jae-man, although there is speculation that they may not attend the hearing. Next Tuesday, Choi and others are scheduled to testify.

While the court has 180 days to make a decision, it has signaled that it will accelerate proceedings citing the gravity of the situation. In fact, Han's term as chief justice is scheduled to end on January 31 with some speculation that a ruling could be handed down before then. At least six of nine justices must approve Park's removal. If Park is forced from office, a new presidential election must be held within 60 days.

Park currently retains the presidency in name only

with power having been transferred to Prime Minister Hwang Gyo-an. She continues to maintain her innocence, going so far as to claim she was framed. Referring to the independent counsel investigating the president, she stated during a press conference on January 1, "[The counsel] completely set me up. I wasn't thinking of giving favors to anybody at all." It was her first public appearance since the National Assembly approved the impeachment motion on December 9.

The protracted political crisis in Seoul reflects widespread popular alienation from the entire political establishment that has been fuelled by the Park administration's austerity measures. Millions of people have protested in the streets to demand Park's removal. Large crowds have gathered in central Seoul for the past 10 Saturdays and small groups of anti-Park protesters gathered outside the Constitutional Court this Tuesday.

At the same time, Park's impeachment reflects deep divisions in ruling circles over the dilemma posed by South Korea's longstanding military ties to the US and its economic dependence on China, its largest trading partner. Park's efforts to establish closer ties with Beijing were undermined by pressure from Washington to deploy a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery in the country, nominally directed against North Korea.

All the major parties are now jockeying for position in the event that Park is removed from office and new presidential elections are called.

The Minjoo Party of Korea (MPK or Democrats), the leading opposition party, is seizing the opportunity to repair relations with China. There is fear in Seoul that the incoming Trump administration's plans in the United States to pursue trade protectionism will harm

the already fragile South Korean economy.

The state-run Korea Institute for International Economic Policy released a report Thursday raising the possibility that South Korea alongside China could be labeled currency manipulators. “If China is labeled as a manipulator, intensifying Washington-Beijing tensions, widespread protectionism will drag down global trade and spark dispute over foreign exchange and trade across the world,” it said. “Such global turmoil would spread to the South Korean economy.”

Seven MPK lawmakers visited China on Wednesday, meeting with Beijing’s foreign minister Wang Yi who called on South Korea to stop the planned deployment of the THAAD battery. China fears that the anti-ballistic missile system is aimed at undermining its own nuclear weapons capacity and is part of US preparations for war against China.

The THAAD battery is currently scheduled to be deployed this year at Seongju, North Gyeongsang Province. Lotte, one of South Korea’s family-owned conglomerates, provided a golf course for the system’s use. Beijing has in fact retaliated against South Korean businesses in China, including revoking subsidies for products made by Samsung and LG. Lotte’s businesses have faced in-depth tax audits and safety inspections.

The MPK has called on the current government to “toss the ball to its successor,” on THAAD but acting-president Hwang is pushing for a quick deployment of the system, citing the supposed threat from North Korea. If Park is removed as president, the MPK anticipates an electoral victory with former Democrat leader Moon Jae-in, who lost to President Park in the last election, currently one of the front-runners for the presidency.

A group of conservatives, who recently broke from the ruling Saenuri Party, also hope to distance themselves from Park, but have maintained a pro-US, anti-China line. Twenty-nine lawmakers from the anti-Park faction of the ruling party formed the tentatively named New Conservative Party for Reform, which is scheduled to be launched on January 24.

They denounced the MPK lawmakers’ trip to China as “kowtowing” to Beijing. Yu Seung-min, another presidential hopeful, stated, “If we take such a step [to negotiate the THAAD deployment], China will continue to infringe upon our sovereignty in other cases.”

The political crisis in Seoul will be intensified by Trump’s inauguration later this month. He has already indicated that he will place dealing with North Korea’s supposed missile threat high on his list of priorities as part of a broader agenda of confronting China that will raise tensions throughout the region.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact