

Ex-South Korean President Park sentenced to 24 years jail

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Former South Korean President Park Geun-hye last week received a 24-year prison sentence and fines of 18 billion won (\$16.8 million) following her conviction on 16 counts of bribery, abuse of power, and leaking state secrets. Her removal from office in 2017 and jailing are an attempt by sections of the South Korean ruling class to deflect mounting anger in the working class over falling living conditions.

Park was found guilty by the Seoul Central District Court of demanding and accepting bribes from some of South Korea's biggest chaebols—family-owned conglomerates—including Samsung, Lotte, and SK—amounting to \$23.2 billion won (\$22.1 million). She was convicted of abuse of power for working with her longtime friend Choi Soon-sil to also funnel money into two foundations controlled by Choi—Mir and K-Sports.

The National Assembly impeached Park in December 2016 and the Constitutional Court removed her from office within three months. Her administration was marked by scandals over the National Intelligence Service's interference in elections and her government's inaction over the sinking of the Sewol ferry in April 2014 that killed 304 people, mostly high school students on a field trip.

The political parties and media are trying to paint the public hostility toward Park's administration as simply being due to her personal incompetence and dishonesty. In fact, working class and student anger grew in response to declining social conditions and the growing danger of war, driven by the US, with North Korea.

High unemployment, particularly among youth, police attacks on striking workers, cozy relations with the chaebols, and a push to privatize public industries and further casualize the work force all fuelled great hostility to Park's government. However, these same

policies had been pursued by previous administrations, whether conservative or Democrat. In November 2015, a mass protest of 130,000 workers in Seoul caught the ruling elites off-guard.

In response, the opposition parties, unions and pseudo-left organisations used the emerging corruption allegations the following year to politically subordinate the working class to the Democratic Party and current President Moon Jae-in, by falsely claiming that Park's removal would be a boon to democracy.

However, anti-Park protesters in 2016 and 2017 also took a significant anti-chaebol stance, placing blame for the situation at the feet of South Korean capitalism more broadly. When Moon came to office last May, he embarked on an anti-corruption campaign that has led to the arrest of former figures within the Park government and, in recent weeks, former President Lee Myung-bak, who held office from 2008 to 2013.

The main opposition Liberty Korea Party has accused Moon of carrying out political revenge against South Korea's conservatives, particularly for the suicide of former Democrat President Noh Moo-hyun in 2009, to whom Moon had been close. Noh also had been caught up in a corruption scandal.

There may be an element of truth in this accusation, as corruption scandals are a common means of settling political scores in the ruling class. However, the main aim of the anti-corruption campaign is to divert attention from the real causes of the country's worsening economic and social crisis, which lie in the profit system itself, not individual politicians and business leaders.

Moon dresses up the anti-corruption campaign as a means of building a "fair and just society." However, he stated last October, as his administration began casting a wider net, that "this is also an undertaking

aimed at enhancing the country's competitiveness.”

In the same month, as Korea Aerospace Industries, the country's only aircraft manufacturer, was mired in a corruption scandal, Moon stated: “Strengthening the competitiveness of the high-value defence industry will lead to more jobs and it will be a springboard for the defence industry to grow into a new growth engine in the future.”

In other words, corruption was impacting on both the export of weaponry and the ability of the manufacturing sector to prepare for war with North Korea.

Moon also faces mounting public hostility. In November, Kim Ji-yoon, a research fellow at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, said in the *Financial Times*: “Now the big challenge for Moon Jae-in is making society much cleaner and more transparent. Young people are saying that something is very wrong.”

Economic uncertainty, particularly for young, working people, continues to worsen. Youth employment hovers around 10 percent officially, and is much higher when the underemployed and those who have given up looking for work are taken into consideration. Students leaving school and their families are often stuck with large amounts of household debt. A recent rise in US interest rates between 1.5 and 1.75 percent and a looming trade war between the US and China are also generating fear of economic instability.

Moon has promised to use a supplementary budget to create jobs for young people, as well as to expand healthcare via a scheme that has become known as “Moon Jae-in Care.” However, the latter plan has been criticized because, while it calls for expanding coverage, health and childcare funds from the 2018 budget have actually been cut.

Moon and the Democrats are also pushing for changes to South Korea's constitution that would, among other revisions, change the single, five-year term limit for the presidency to two, four-year terms while giving more power to the National Assembly, supposedly as a means to limit the president's position. Moon claims the new term limits would take effect after his presidency.

Constitutional revision has been discussed for years, but has repeatedly hit roadblocks. The jailing of Park Geun-hye and Lee Myung-bak has given this a renewed impetus.

However, all of these proposed changes, even if they do eventually materialize, will do nothing to fundamentally alter conditions in South Korea facing workers and students, or halt the looming threat of war on the Korean Peninsula.



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