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Body and Seoul

In South Korea, a remarkable protest movement is shaking up politics. But there's still no happy ending in sight

On 9 December, South Korea's National Assembly voted to impeach President Park Geun-hye. It was a step that had become unavoidable. The scandal around alleged cronyism and corruption in Park's most intimate personal circles has completely eroded trust in the president. Increasingly large demonstrations against the conservative leader have been held in the capital Seoul and other major cities every Saturday since late October. Some of these marches saw over a million people take to the streets. On 3 December, up to an estimated 2.3 million people took part in protests across the country.

Park's attempts to appease her compatriots by issuing half-hearted apologies, dismissing aides and even making a conditional offer to step down were unsuccessful. Through the demonstrations, citizens asserted with increased vigour their democratic right to remove the president. Park was allegedly involved in corrupt schemes with her close friend Choi Soon-sil. It appears she also allowed the latter to manipulate her and intervene in her official duties. A large majority of people, polls show, have decided enough is enough.

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Even before corruption allegations came to light, Park's reputation was less than stellar. On 16 April 2014 the ferry Sewol sank, causeing 304 fatalities – mostly schoolchildren. Yet Park was uncontactable for seven hours. She has so far refused to give a reason for her absence. Some conjectured that Park, who is single, might have been having a romantic liaison or taking part in a shamanic ritual. More recently newspapers have speculated she was undergoing medical or cosmetic treatment. However, the matter remains unclear to this day.

What is clear is that the president was not there for her people as she had promised in her election campaign and that she did not believe she

needed to account to them for her actions. Meanwhile, the ferry disaster, which could have been avoided and was exacerbated by corruption, cronyism and failures on the part of the authorities, took its tragic course.

Calls for impeachment

The constantly expanding mass protests every Saturday from late October to early December caught politicians and the media by surprise. The opposition's response was initially hesitant, and they had to be pushed into filing an impeachment motion against Park. When they did so, the motion was supported by almost half the parliamentary representatives of Park's own conservative party.

Corruption and cronyism are not unusual in South Korea's heads of state. Since the introduction of democracy in the country in 1987, every president has been investigated for corruption following the end of their term, if not before. So it was surprising to see such huge numbers directing their ire towards Park in particular. But the marches are clearly about more than the rage and disappointment she had provoked. In her election campaign, Park declared herself to be incorruptible because she had no close relatives or children of her own – i.e. no one on whom she would be inclined to bestow particular favours.

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Even more mobilising has been a renewed disillusionment with South Korea's political and economic system as a whole. The foundations for the country's economic boom and development into an industrialised nation were first laid down during the reign of Park's father Park Chung-hee, who ruled the country with an iron fist from 1961 to 1978 and transformed it into a developmental dictatorship. People spoke of "the Miracle on the Han River"[KA1] .

The autocrat also instigated the close ties that exist between politicians and South Korea's large business conglomerates, known as chaebols, which are estimated today to create around 80 percent of South Korean gross national product. The chaebols have been associated with political corruption for some time. Politicians usually gloss over it, or claim the problem is unavoidable and that anyway, the entire country has benefited from this symbiotic relationship. As president, Park Geun-hye's rhetoric and symbolism always followed in the footsteps of her father's policies, which were presented through rose-tinted spectacles.

Surprisingly peaceful protests

In a country known for its bloody clashes on the streets, the peaceful and orderly nature of these latest demonstrations has come as a surprise. The protests have been family occasions, illuminated by the light of hundreds of thousands of candles, LEDs and phones. The demonstrators have even cleared up their rubbish afterwards.

The protests have also been notably leaderless and not dominated by a particular group. Students and trade unionists, who are otherwise the driving force behind (usually militant) opposition on the streets, have been involved but not taken centre stage. Instead, a broad, mature and peaceful civil society that transcends party and organisational boundaries has found its expression.

Some disparagingly label the recent protest movement "populist". But it is characterised precisely by its calls for adherence to the law and penalties for corrupt politicians and business heads who do fail to do so. The demonstrators' focus has been on the close and oft-criticised ties between leading politicians and the chaebols, most of which [KA2] were pressured into making financial donations by Park and her confidante.

But the people of South Korea are becoming fed up with the corrupt special relationship enjoyed by politicians and the chaebols. The alliance appears increasingly to benefit only a narrow elite in business and politics. Meanwhile while large swathes of the population feel they are forced to work all hours, with little to show for it.

Demonstrators call for overdue reforms

The people of South Korea have long since internalised the democracy that they fought for in the 1980s, and wish to see it developed further. But the corrupt special relationships between politicians and the chaebols date back to the time of the dictatorship, when people and parliament did not yet have a right to participation, information and transparency. Moreover, the high economic growth rates that were used to justify these relationships in the past have not been achieved for a long time.

It is not only the sinking of the Sewol that has made clear the pressing need for reform in South Korea. 2016 was a year of crisis, in which the country's largest shipping line, Hanjin Shipping, went bankrupt, and faulty batteries in Samsung's Galaxy Note 7 smartphone lost the firm billions in sales.

The Constitutional Court must now rule within the next 180 days on

whether Park's impeachment is valid. A majority of at least six of the nine predominantly conservative judges is required. The chief judge is stepping down from his post in late January, and a second judge will be retiring in March. It is disputed whether the acting president, Hwang Kyo-ahn (former prime minister and confidante of Park), is authorised to appoint successors. The court is under great public pressure to rule against Park, but how it will decide remains uncertain.

Park and ride off

Unter the constitution, Park is permitted a single term that would ordinarily end in February 2018. Whatever the result of the court case, she can no longer achieve anything politically as president. If she remains in office she will be overshadowed by her own scandal. She will only attract more protests if she returns to office at a later date.

So far, the initiation of impeachment proceedings represents only a partial victory, achieved on the basis of truly historic protests. It is now no longer simply a matter of Park's being removed from office as peacefully as possible; following new, democratic elections, there needs to be a new government that is serious about reform.

The centre-left opposition has no guarantee of victory. South Korea's first free elections in 1987 show that an opposition split between multiple candidates can be disastrous. The opposition already has four potential candidates. But Park's conservative Saenuri Party is also split; a faction of the party wants former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to be the presidential candidate. The Saenuri Party has not yet put an official candidate forward.

The path to the genuine reforms demanded by the demonstrators remains long and gruelling. Nonetheless, the protests, which have been forceful and surprising in equal measure, shocking both the Park government and the chaebol bosses, offer reason to be hopeful about the possibility of reform.



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