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Parked behind bars

South Koreans checked the retreat of democracy. Now it's time for the Americans

On Friday, ousted South Korean President Park Geun-hye found herself behind bars, following her arrest on corruption charges. It follows a unanimous decision by the South Korean Constitutional Court three weeks earlier to uphold the leader's impeachment over a corruption and influence-peddling scandal. The Court determined that President Park violated Korean law by allowing her long-time friend and confidant, Choi Soon-sil, to interfere in state affairs thereby seriously impairing the principles of democracy.

The impeachment represents a remarkable success for the South Korean people. The indignant but disciplined public demanded that President Park step down in a remarkably peaceful and mature manner (not only refraining from violence but also picking up the garbage left after the protests), leading to the ouster of the illegitimate leader through democratic procedures. As a South Korean citizen, I send this message to the American people: we, South Koreans, successfully checked the retreat of democracy. Now it's your turn.

Entering week seven, the Trump presidency has already shown numerous resemblances to the administration of President Park. Maybe dictatorial minds think alike. Both have utilised conspiracy theories and fear mongering to consolidate their political bases and undermine the opposition. The Park administration sowed fear that pro–North Korea leftists may overthrow the government, stigmatising anyone critical of her policies as *jongbuk* or North Korean sympathisers—whatever that means. You may wonder how these timeworn, red scare tactics could still work in this day and age, but they continue to succeed in a country whose elderly are permanently scarred by the communist North's invasion, which led to a three-year war in the 1950s. Ms. Park's recent insinuation that she is an innocent victim of a leftist conspiracy possibly backed by North Korea spurred tens of thousands of elderly people to take to the streets opposing her impeachment. Similarly, Mr. Trump is playing the xenophobic card, exaggerating threats from Muslims and undocumented immigrants. A new addition to his toolbox is the conspiracy theory that

President Barack Obama had seeded operatives throughout the government to bring down his presidency. The resemblance of Ms. Park and Mr. Trump to each other in this regard is significant.

“Enemy of the people”

Another similarity between President Park and President Trump lies in their attitude towards the media. According to Freedom House, a Washington-based non-profit organisation, Ms. Park significantly suppressed freedom of the press to stifle criticism of her policies, invoking the National Security Law or the criminal ban on defamation. Furthermore, Ms. Park allegedly ordered the creation of a blacklist of almost ten thousand artists and writers deemed unfriendly to her administration, a blacklist that excluded them from government-sponsored support programmes. Likewise, President Trump's recent characterisation of the media as the "enemy of the people" may be a worrisome warning sign of an infringement of freedom of the press and expression in the United States.

Lastly, there are worries whether President Trump will abuse his office in order to amass personal wealth, an allegation that Ms. Park faces today. South Korean prosecutors have concluded that President Park colluded with Choi Sun-sil to extort nearly $70 million U.S. dollars from large conglomerates, including Samsung. Lee Jae-yong, the de facto leader of Samsung, was accused of "donating" $36 million to foundations run by Choi, who is believed to share assets with Ms. Park, in return for political favours; he was arrested last month. This is not to say that President Trump is likely to extort money as President Park did. However, President Trump's refusal to distance himself from his businesses raises the concern that his policies may be influenced by his personal financial interests.

Four years of the Park presidency has inflicted serious damage on South Korean society. The media has lost its capacity to check government power. The intelligence community has been degraded as a political tool for Ms. Park. The artistic and intellectual communities have self-censored their words and deeds in fear of retaliation. Corruption abounds. If left unchecked, the Trump presidency could cause comparable harm to American society. Thankfully, the United States retains a functioning media, intelligence agencies, courts, etc. that can provide checks and balances against the government. What will further help the United States maintain its democracy is a continuous effort by the public to stand up against fear, hatred, and intolerance, keeping alive the spirit of peaceful yet ardent political activism. South Korea, a young democracy relative to the United States, succeeded. America, so can you.

This article first appeared on the website of the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School.



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