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Room at the top

A corruption scandal that forced South Korea's president out of office has left the country vulnerable

With the irreversible removal of President Park Geun-hye from office, South Koreans must weather another two months of a leadership vacuum.

It could have been worse. Many analysts say a return to power by Park – who had been widely seen as illegitimate since her impeachment – would have extended the void until a regular presidential election in December.

Still, it's unchartered territory in South Korea's democracy and there is plenty of time until the special presidential election in early May for South Koreans and foreign actors to test the resolve of the caretaker government.

Acting head

Since learning his boss would be permanently exiting the Blue House, acting president and Prime Minister Hwang Kyo-ahn called for unity among people who "are so divided" over Park's downfall.

Hwang was Park's number two and is viewed unfavourably by many Koreans, considering his long-standing ties and loyalty to the former president.

"Hostility and hatred have escalated over time. Worse yet, there is a growing phenomenon of thinking of each other as enemies," said Hwang.

That was evident last Friday as diehard pro-Park protesters became violent and three people were killed in clashes with police after the Constitutional Court upheld her impeachment.

Park left the Blue House on Sunday, two days after the ruling. She made a statement the same day, refusing to accept the court's judgement and saying that in time, the truth will be revealed.

Park is accused of colluding with a confidante, Choi Soon-sil, to extort money from major South Korean corporations for personal gain.

Pushing the limits

The acting government's role in this void until the elections in May, essentially, is to maintain the policy status quo until someone with a political mandate to lead takes over.

Until then, any major decision made by Hwang and Co. would likely be politicised -- i.e., seen as an attempt to influence the special election.

Scott Snyder, a senior fellow for Korea studies at the Council on Foreign Relations says an act by North Korea could pose the biggest challenge in the political vacuum, especially "ambiguous" actions. However, other analysts consider such arguments to be akin to comments made by conservative South Korean politicians whenever there is an election campain.

After months of silence, North Korea has begun testing intermediate range missiles again. Snyder says the launches and nuclear tests don't have as much of an impact in the South as they do in the Japan and the US.

He has suggested a border skirmish could earn the public's backing for retaliation by the acting government.

In recent years, there was the fatal sinking of the Cheonan naval corvette (2010); fatal shelling of Yeonpyeong Island (2010); and the wounding of two South Korean soldiers in the demilitarised zone by landmines allegedly laid by North Korea (2015).

What about THAAD?

One action of the Hwang government has already been placed in a political context.

Easrlier this month, South Korea and the US deployed to the peninsula the first elements of an advanced missile defence system known as THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defence). The South Korean government and the US administration had agreed the early deployment of some parts in February, during the visit of US defence secretary James Mattis in February.

Many Koreans are crying foul, saying a decision with such a major impact in the region should be left up to the next elected government.

In hopes of blocking its deployment, China has been putting an economic squeeze on South Korea through boycotts of Korean retail stores in China and travel packages to the South.

Beijing fears THAAD is a US tool of military containment and Washington plans to spy on China with the unit's powerful radar.

Park Byung-kwang, the head of Northeast Asia research at the Institute for National Security Strategy (INSS), believes the growing threat posed by North Korea's weapons programme justifies immediate deployment of THAAD.

"I want the burden on the next government to be decreased by the quick deployment of THAAD," he says.

Park also says the impeachment hasn't created a larger security threat because South Korea has a national security apparatus that can act in a vacuum.

The recent visit to Seoul by US Secretary of Defence James Mattis, he added, as well as talks between President Trump and Prime Minister Hwang following North Korea's latest missile tests, have reaffirmed the ROK-US alliance.

"Our national security has not been faced with a very big problem," Park said. "Don't worry about it."

Policy changes coming

President Park's ouster has set the stage for a new government to take over with markedly different policies about engagement in the region.

Following North Korea's fourth nuclear test in early 2016 and subsequent missile launches, the Park government essentially abandoned her heralded trust-building stance towards the North, known as "trust-politik," for a sanctions-only approach. Sven Schwersensky, resident representative of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung office in Seoul, sees the timing of the announcement as purely rhetorical, since all programmes to strengthen bilateral cooperation had been cut back since 2015.

The US agrees with the hard-line approach, which remains in place in the

absence of a leader in Seoul who can direct policy.

But May's snap election is likely to leave the country in the hands of Moon Jae-in, the former leader of South Korea's main opposition party.

"Moon and the US government aren't naturally on the same page," says Stephan Haggard, professor of Korea-Pacific Studies at the University of California San Diego.

South Korea has taken a backseat while tensions flare in the region amid the new US administration's push to deploy THAAD and North Korea's resumption of missile testing.

"If Moon Jae-in is elected then the South really does become an active player in this whole thing," says Haggard. "And how he chooses to approach North Korea, China and the US becomes much more consequential."

Moon is well ahead in local public opinion polls to win the Blue House after losing it in 2012 to his conservative rival, Park, who was just kicked out.



Bruce Harrison

Bruce Harrison is a multimedia journalist living in Seoul. He's reported for the CBC, VOA and The Diplomat magazine, among others. Follow him @brucesbeat and view his work online at bruceharrison.net.