

South Korean opposition parties call for President Park's impeachment

By Ben McGrath
23 November 2016

The protests against South Korean President Park Geun-hye continued last Saturday with another mass demonstration in Seoul. Opposition party lawmakers also moved closer to impeaching Park after she was named an accomplice on Sunday in the scandal that has been used as a focal point for widespread anger toward the president.

Approximately one million people gathered around South Korea to demand Park resign, with 600,000 in Gwanghwamun, Seoul alone. Many held placards that read “Park Geun-hye resign” and “Park Geun-hye, Out!” Another 100,000 demonstrated against Park in Busan and 40,000 denounced her in Gwangju. Tens of thousands held protests in other cities.

The immediate scandal involves accusations that Park allowed her personal confidante, Choi Soon-sil, to be involved in deciding policy matters despite holding no formal government post. Choi allegedly used her position to solicit funds from corporations that passed into companies which she effectively controlled.

While the scandal reflects divisions within South Korean ruling circles, including Park's own Saenuri Party, the demonstrations are also being driven by far broader popular opposition among workers and youth to her administration's attacks on basic democratic and social rights. The protests have been the largest in the country since 1987, when pro-democracy rallies forced General Chun Doo-hwan to allow direct presidential elections.

Workers are hostile to Park's drive to casualize the workforce, cut jobs, and privatize state-owned industries. Before joining Saturday's mass rally, 50,000 members of the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU) held a rally in Seoul Square to demand Park's resignation. The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) also announced it would hold a

general strike on November 30. Both the FKTU and KCTU are attempting to direct anger in the working class into support for the opposition Democrats, the Minjoo Party of Korea (MPK).

Youth and students have continued to be active at the rallies. “Park's resignation is not the end of the issue. The concentration of power (in the hands of the president) is a fundamental problem. And we can't expect a fair and thorough investigation by prosecutors,” Park Ji-u, a high school senior, told the media. Another high school senior, Kim Ji-yun, stated: “There are more of us (students) willing to speak out about state matters as citizens of South Korea as well, even though we are young.”

The demonstrations are unlikely to die down. Investigators released new findings on Sunday. “We have named the president as a suspect, believing she was an accomplice of (Choi and her aides in the scandal),” Lee Yeong-ryeol, head of the prosecution's special investigation team, told a press conference.

This is the first time a sitting president in South Korea has been labeled a criminal suspect. Park is protected from indictment while in office, making her voluntary resignation improbable.

The primary suspects, Choi, An Jong-beom, and Jeong Ho-seong, have all been indicted. Choi has been accused of setting up a slush fund for the president through two non-profit companies and, with the aid of An, pressuring corporations to give money. Jeong is suspected of passing documents to Choi.

On November 15, the National Assembly passed a bill establishing an independent counsel to continue the investigation, separate from that of the prosecutor. It will hold hearings on December 5, with lawmakers from the opposition and ruling parties agreeing to call the heads of top companies, including Samsung and the

Hyundai Motor Group, for questioning. The ruling Saenuri Party has blocked the president from being called as a witness.

Park previously agreed to be questioned by prosecutors. She has since reneged on her promise and is now refusing to cooperate with the investigation. “We cannot trust the prosecution’s objectivity and fairness, so we will never respond to its request to conduct in-person questioning,” Yu Yeong-ha, Park’s lawyer, said. “Rather, we will prepare for the planned impartial independent counsel.”

The push to impeach Park is gaining momentum. At a recent meeting of the main opposition MPK, members unanimously passed a statement calling for her impeachment. “Once the National Assembly passes an impeachment bill, and the Constitutional Court makes the right decision through a review of criminal charges against Park that have been exposed so far, the impeachment will be accomplished,” MPK leader Chu Mi-ae said.

While still calling for Park to step down, another opposition party, the People’s Party, has made impeachment its official stance.

In order for the president to be removed from office, two-thirds of the 300 members of the National Assembly must approve the measure. With 165 seats under their control, the opposition parties need at least 29 Saenuri Party lawmakers to agree, as well as six independents. Six of nine Constitutional Court justices must also agree to remove the president.

The People’s Party is calling for Park to appoint a prime minister selected by the National Assembly to take over in the event she resigns or is removed from office. Park has rejected such a measure. Sim Sang-jeong, head of the minor Justice Party, which poses as a left-wing alternative to the MPK, has taken a similar stance, requesting a meeting of opposition parties to discuss an impeachment bill.

Significantly, the anti-Park faction of the Saenuri Party has called for Park’s impeachment, lending the opposition its support. Led by former party leader Kim Mu-seong, 32 Saenuri lawmakers backed Park’s removal in a meeting with opposition leaders. Two anti-Park members of the Saenuri Party, Nam Gyeong-pil, governor of Gyeonggi Province, and lawmaker Kim Yong-tae, left the party on Tuesday, a move that could lead to more defections.

The opposition parties are exploiting the scandal to move against Park while at the same time deflecting public attention from the deepening crisis of capitalism gripping South Korea no less than other countries. None of these parties has anything to offer workers and youth except casualization and job cuts, policies that both the conservatives and Democrats have carried out at the behest of big business since the end of the military dictatorship in the 1990s.

By the end of October, the country’s shipbuilding industry, just one sector facing layoffs, had axed more than 20,000 jobs this year, with another 20,000 job losses expected by the end of 2016. These crucial social issues are not being raised at the protests. Instead, the MPK and its allies are hoping to channel the public anger against Park into support for its candidates in next year’s presidential election. Another rally is scheduled for November 26.

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