

Court hears final arguments in South Korean president's trial

By Ben McGrath
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The impeachment trial of South Korean President Park Geun-hye concluded last Monday. She is accused of being involved in a corruption scandal that includes her close aides and high-level executives at local conglomerates. The Constitutional Court is now deliberating on whether to uphold Park's impeachment by the National Assembly on December 9 and remove her from office. A verdict is expected by mid-March.

Park refused to appear before the court or face questioning by the special prosecution counsel set up to investigate the corruption allegations. Her legal team agreed to sit down with investigators on February 9, only to pull back, claiming that the latter had violated good faith by leaking the schedule to the media and insisting that the session be recorded.

One of her defense attorneys conveyed a written statement from Park to the court on Monday, reiterating what she had previously said publicly. "I have never been involved in corruption and graft in my political journey," Park stated. "Among the numerous things I have done until now, not one was for my personal interest, and I have never exercised or abused my authority as president for myself or those around me."

The special prosecutors named Park a suspect in the separate corruption case last Tuesday, but she is immune from indictment while in office. They have accused her of colluding with her close friend Choi Soon-sil to accept bribes from major corporations.

If the Constitutional Court upholds the National Assembly's decision, a new presidential election will be held within 60 days. Leading contenders include Moon Jae-in from the opposition Democratic Party of Korea (DPK).

The prosecution team also formally indicted 18 others, notably Lee Jae-yong, vice chairman of Samsung Electronics and heir to the largest chaebol

(family-owned conglomerate) in South Korea. This brought the total number of indictments to 31, the largest since the introduction of the special prosecutor system in 1999.

Among the list of charges, which also include perjury and embezzlement, Lee is charged with handing over 43 billion won (\$37 million) to firms controlled by Choi in exchange for the government approving a merger between Samsung affiliates Cheil and Samsung C&T Corporation in 2015. The move, through cross shareholdings, solidified Lee as next in line to take over the conglomerate from his ailing father Lee Kun-hee.

According to the Yonhap News Agency, the merger also led to profits of 854.9 billion won (\$754.7 million), while depriving the state-run National Pension Service (NPS) of at least 138.8 billion won (\$122.5 million). However, the NPS approved Samsung's move. Four other senior Samsung executives will face trial as well.

The Seoul Central District Court approved an arrest warrant for Lee Jae-yong on February 17. A warrant was previously sought by the investigation team in January, but the request was denied. After the counsel presented new charges and evidence, the court approved Lee's detention.

There is little new or shocking about these allegations, in and of themselves. South Korea's chaebols have long been hotbeds of corruption, with government officials turning a blind eye or benefitting from kickbacks. Seoul, regardless of the party in power, is also no stranger to using extra-legal and outright oppression to enforce its agenda.

Park's impeachment is a sign of the struggle taking place within the political establishment over how to balance between the US and China amid sharpening

tensions between the two powers, exacerbated by the election of Donald Trump.

Park came to office in 2013, seemingly with the intent of developing a closer relationship with Beijing. While the Obama administration publicly supported Park, tensions with Seoul grew over the US deployment of a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile battery in South Korea. After dragging out a decision, the Park administration finally agreed to the THAAD deployment in July 2016 but negotiations continued over where and when the battery would be installed.

China opposed the THAAD installation. Far from being a defensive measure against North Korea as the US claims, THAAD and its accompanying radar system are aimed at Beijing. In the event of an attack on China, the battery would be used to knock out any response by the Chinese military.

Significantly, at no point during the mounting political crisis that led to her impeachment in December did Washington express support for Park. Within Park's right-wing Saenuri Party, since renamed the Liberty Korea Party, a prominent group of lawmakers backed Park's impeachment. They split and set up the Bareun (Righteous) Party in January.

Acting president Hwang Gyo-an has promised to push forward with the THAAD deployment. Last week, the military and Lotte, another South Korean chaebol, signed a land swap agreement to provide a location for the weapon on a golf course in the southeastern city of Seongju. The battery could be installed as early as May, two months earlier than previous predictions.

The Bareun Party's Kim Moo-sung (Kim Mu-seong) and Yu Seung-min, a presidential contender, have been highly critical of China. Kim, as chairman of the Saenuri Party in July 2015, stated in Washington: "The US seems to have suspicion that South Korea may be coming too close to China, but it should be kept in mind that none other than the US is the only, irreplaceable, unique ally."

In September 2015, Yu criticized Defense Minister Han Min-gu over the Park administration's public position on THAAD and its relations with Washington. He also questioned the president's appearance at a military parade in Beijing that month, which had raised concerns in the Obama administration. "Seoul must make it clear the US-South Korea military alliance ... is

a blood alliance free of problems, and clarify this fact for the citizens of both the United States and South Korea," Yu stated.

Yu also said in January: "We should hardly have to be conscious about China's stance. Rather, we should convince China by saying that once the North Korean nuclear issue is solved we will withdraw THAAD from the Korean peninsula." The Bareun Party denounced a visit by seven opposition DPK lawmakers to China in January as "kowtowing" to Beijing.

The DPK, which has not opposed the THAAD installation in principle, is attempting to capitalise on public opposition to the deployment, which will ensure South Korea is a target in any conflict between the US and China. The DPK delegation, which was an attempt to ease tensions with Beijing, carried a message from its potential presidential candidates, including Moon Jae-in, who are now pushing to put off a final decision on THAAD for the next administration.

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