

A Democratic Breakthrough in South Korea?

March 27, 2017

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The world's eyes have been locked on the dramatic events that have shaken politics in South Korea. After a drawn-out scandal and months of mass protests, the country's president has been ousted. Setting aside rising concerns about the dire state of liberal politics across the world, this appears to be good news for democracy. But it is still not clear whether these momentous events can be harnessed to bring about deep structural changes in South Korean politics.

South Korea's Constitutional Court ruled unanimously on March 10, 2017, to remove President Park Geun-hye from office. The court backed the National Assembly's impeachment of the president after Park allowed her confidante Choi Soon-sil to meddle in state affairs and assisted Choi's pursuit of personal gain—along with secondary offenses that included abusing authority in sacking government officials, violating the freedom of the press, and failing to protect people's lives during the [April 2014 Sewol ferry tragedy](#). The legal charges against the former president are still to be determined.

With the scandals largely played out, attention is turning to South Korea's presidential election on May 9, 2017, and to the longer-term impact of recent events on South Korean democracy.

A Boost for South Korean Democracy

On one level, the first-ever impeachment of a South Korean president is a source of shame on the global stage for the country's democratic image. But on another level, many South Koreans see this historic incident as a beacon of hope—and as a reaffirmation of their democracy. A commanding majority of South Koreans view the court's decision as a confirmation of the rule of law. According to [one poll](#) taken just after the court announced its decision, nine out of ten South Koreans accepted the result. Before the ruling, four out of ten indicated that they would not accept a judgment contrary to their own position.

While the South Korean people place more trust in the country's judiciary than the executive or legislature branches, a significant number of South Koreans have accused the legal system of being discriminatory in favor of the rich and powerful. The

This article was first published as part of the publication for [Rising Democracies Network](#) initiated by Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The East Asia Institute takes no institutional position on policy issues and has no affiliation with the Korean government. All statements of fact and expressions of opinion contained in its publications are the sole responsibility of the author or authors.

"A Democratic Breakthrough in South Korea?" 979-11-87558-43-9 95340

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level of trust in the prosecutor's office is [particularly low](#) because it is viewed as being susceptible to the influence of the president. Now, with the Constitutional Court ruling that a president should be removed if they violate the law and betray public trust, the people's confidence in the judicial system appears to have increased.

Furthermore, South Koreans seem to agree that they must rely on the court as the ultimate authority when public opinion and civil society are divided. In the wake of the scandal becoming public, the first wave of protests demanded that then president Park be held accountable for her actions. After her impeachment, however, pro-Park demonstrations grew, resulting in conflict between the two groups. South Korean civil society has long been divided by ideological orientation and age group, and Park's impeachment once again brought these divisions to the forefront. [A majority of people regard](#) such social divisions as unhealthy and want to see the rule of law prevail.

Another positive outcome from the scandal has been the empowerment of civil society. The first candle was lit at a protest vigil in Seoul's downtown plaza on October 29, 2016; about 20,000 people joined the protest in reaction to Park's inadequate apology made four days previously. The next Saturday, the protest had grown tenfold; a week later, on November 12, the protest drew citizens from other cities to reach a [turnout of 1 million](#) as estimated by organizers.

This series of peaceful Saturday protests pushed a segment of ruling-party members of parliament to break ranks. The National Parliament then introduced a motion for impeachment and the president's Saenuri Party, now called the Liberty Korea Party, split apart.

South Korean civil society has long been a vibrant check on power. It mobilized to oppose the [impeachment of then president Roh Moo-hyun](#) in 2004 and to oppose former president [Lee Myung-bak's government's decision](#) to import U.S. beef in 2008. But this show of opposition was unprecedented in terms of both the magnitude of participation and the

festive atmosphere at the protests. This experience may inspire more citizens to engage in national affairs and participate in South Korea's democracy—as long as so-called citizen or plaza politics do not weaken the administration's ability to govern or undermine the ability of elected representatives to fulfil their duties.

Reforming the Old System

Because the Choi scandal was related to the larger cause of social reform, South Korean citizens were able to sustain their mobilization for five months. Following repeated incidents of corrupt presidents abusing their power, South Koreans have a strong desire to steer their country away from its old political system, which is characterized by an imperial presidency and illicit ties with business conglomerates.

Through a system developed with support from the state bureaucracy, South Korean conglomerates have provided illicit funds to major presidential candidates and donated money at the request of the president. Public officials accept bribes offered by big business to achieve specific goals or cultivate personal ties.

The [Kim Young-ran anti-graft law](#), which was introduced in 2015 and took effect in 2016, is designed to limit these practices. However, no conglomerate in South Korea is willing to reject a president's request for support. In the Choi Soon-sil scandal, the government asked for cash from conglomerates to set up two foundations, using the Federation of Korean Industries as a channel. Park met with a group of conglomerate chairmen and several individual chairmen to encourage donations, and Samsung Group's top managers offered money directly to Choi. Prosecutors are investigating these transactions as a possible form of bribery to Park, as well as to Choi, in return for government support for a controversial [company merger](#). This merger is believed to have facilitated the transfer of leadership from Samsung Chairman Lee Kun-hee to his heir, Lee Jae-yong.



With momentum from the Choi scandal, South Koreans are pushing for a reform of state-business relations toward a fair and transparent market economy. The Federation of Korean Industries is undergoing reorganization, and conglomerate chairmen are vowing to adhere to a more transparent system of management.

Another episode that came to light during the probe into Park and her entourage was the so-called black list that excluded cultural and arts groups perceived as leftist from eligibility for government grants and subsidies. Park's administration also attempted to introduce an official state history textbook to the public school curriculum, but the attempt failed when citizens mobilized against it. Park's general governance style is widely perceived to have resembled that of her father, Park Chung-hee, who led the nation's modernization under an authoritarian regime. It was this political climate as much as the Choi affair itself that brought people out onto the streets—and it means that deeper political change will now be necessary to quell discontent.

Critics assert that South Korea's mixed parliamentary and presidential system gives the president a disproportionate amount of power, and that it has failed to be effective or sufficiently democratic. In the past, politicians have raised the possibility of changing the nation's power structure through constitutional revision. In spring 2016, the opposition parties began once again to debate changing the current five-year, single-term presidential system. They view the current system as having numerous pitfalls: a winner-take-all electoral system that exaggerates presidential majorities; dysfunctional relations between the president and parliament; and a president that quickly becomes a lame duck due to the single-term limit. Synchronizing the presidential and legislative election cycles could lead to more productive governance by forcing the president to work harder to cooperate with the legislature. Those pushing for reform have floated

ideas for a cabinet system, a semi-presidential system, and a four-year, up-to-two-term presidency.

This debate will now be revived in the coming presidential election debates. Whether an alternative system would make South Korean democracy stronger is not certain, but many agree that South Korea needs a new system that will facilitate power sharing and shift away from the current imperial presidency.

Resetting Toward an Inclusive and Mature Democracy

The bigger debate among South Korean civil society and politicians is over creating a more inclusive democracy.

South Korea is currently mired in complex social problems brought about by an aging population and class polarization. Many economic issues have arisen due to ongoing sluggish growth. Small-business bankruptcy, youth unemployment and the resulting decline in marriage and birth rate, and elderly poverty [affect a large sector of the population](#). As income and asset equality deteriorates, economic deprivation is rising, along with calls for fairer distribution and increased opportunities for social mobility. Neither the government nor the community has been able to reduce social anxiety or provide security to all South Koreans.

Many individuals feel they are not integrated members of a caring community. Against this backdrop, the recent citizen protests have provided those who felt alienated with a sense of community. Through peaceful protest with a million fellow citizens, people found a community aiming to revive democracy. This sense of political community is comparable only to the 1987 democratic struggle that pushed the authoritarian regime to restore direct presidential elections at the people's demand.

At some point, the civic protests, which began as a simple demand for Park to step down, started to include slogans advocating a broader rebuilding of the



nation. How this sense of political community can be harnessed to push for a fairer economic agenda in the future remains to be seen. But it is certain that politicians will begin to consider economic democratization and more inclusive socioeconomic policies. The term “economic democratization” is a vague concept that entered public consciousness as Park’s rallying campaign cry but has now evolved and is widely used in South Korea as a policy package that includes reforming the corporate governance of conglomerates as a key issue. While Park did not implement this package, politicians aiming to be the next president are expressing their commitment to reforming state-business relations.

The question now is how the civic protests that demanded the rule of democracy can be sustained and extended to advocate better economic governance. Economic agendas tend to be less unifying, dividing the people into smaller stakeholder groups. At the same time, citizen or plaza politics are essentially an ephemeral phenomenon that tends to disappear once their goal is met. The bloc of citizens who voluntarily participated in protests has dissipated into isolated individual voters. If citizens want to provide input on any concrete policy, they need to build more effective networks with their legislators that extend beyond election periods.

This is a critical juncture in South Korea’s democratic consolidation, where a sustainable direct democracy that complements the existing representative democracy could be created as a route toward a truly mature democracy. This road toward resetting the country will not be easy. Nevertheless, South Korea has acquired a number of valuable lessons from the scandal that led to the first-ever impeachment of their president. Now is the time for South Koreans to reflect on how to use the power of the people to build the advanced democracy they wish to realize in the near future. ■

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