

EAI COLUMN

December 2, 2016

Acknowledgement

This column was originally published by the Asia & the Pacific Policy Society Policy Forum. This was re-published with the permission. The original column can be found [here](#).

EAI Column presents fresh, constructive opinions and policy suggestions on Korean society and politics as well as East Asian security and international relations issues from recognized experts.

Please acknowledge the source of this article if used as a citation.

The EAI is a nonprofit and independent research organization in Korea. The contents of this article do not necessarily reflect the views of EAI.

The East Asia Institute
#909 Sampoong B/D
Eulji-ro 158, Jung-gu
Seoul 04548
Republic of Korea

© EAI 2016

www.eai.or.kr

Scandal and Corruption Plaguing South Korea Presidential Abuse of Power must Cease

Sook Jong Lee
East Asia Institute

President Park Geun-hye announced on 29 November her willingness to step down and asked the National Assembly to decide when she should do so. Opposition party lawmakers had vowed to impeach her by 9 December, the last day of this year's plenary session. A group of ruling party lawmakers, who do not belong to the pro-president faction within the party, promised to join this impeachment effort. Now, with President Park's proposal of a voluntary resignation, they are beginning to negotiate with the opposition leaders to arrange a political timetable for her to step down "in an orderly fashion." If these negotiations fail, impeachment is likely.

Whichever course is taken to resolve the biggest political crisis since democratization, one that has now gone on for over a month, she will not be allowed to complete her full five-year presidential term. While this is a first since the country became a democracy in 1987, it is not the first time a South Korean president has been unable to complete their full term in office. Two of her predecessors also suffered this fate. South Korea's first president, Syngman Rhee, was ousted from power by the 1960 student revolution, and President Park's own father, Park Chung-hee, was assassinated while on duty in 1979. What is happening to South Korea, one of the few consolidated democracies in East Asia?

President Park Geun-hye's political life has become engulfed by the Choi Soon-sil

scandal. Ms. Choi is a long-time friend of President Park. The pair's 40-year friendship began through President Park's friendship with Choi's father, a confidant to the President in her youth. Choi Soon-sil is alleged to have gained access to confidential government documents and been involved in illicit fund-raising to establish two foundations to promote the President's cultural policy.

President Park's aides blame her for their actions and prosecutors have identified her as a criminal suspect who conspired with Choi to extort tens of millions of dollars from South Korean conglomerates. Now the President faces investigation by the independent counsel, although she cannot be indicted while in office.

Aside from the legal charges, ongoing discoveries of the President's bizarre personal life and revelations about the wrongdoings of Ms. Choi's family members have resulted in President Park losing the moral authority to govern. Public outcry over the outrageous scandal has exploded into massive, weekly, candlelight protests demanding the President's immediate resignation. Her failure to account for the government's abysmal response to the Sewol ferry tragedy in 2014 and reform the ruling party after its devastating losses in the April 2016 election have also contributed to her political downfall.

According to the Corruption Perceptions Index reported by Transparency International, South Korea averaged a ranking of 41 from

1995 until 2015. In 2015, South Korea was ranked the 37th least corrupt nation out of 175 countries. While not necessarily a poor record, other Asian neighbours were perceived as much less corrupt, with Japan ranking 18th and Singapore listed in 8th place. Within South Korea's dense interpersonal networks, Koreans tend to be loyal to each other once they are identified as in-group members. These loyalty networks are vulnerable to corruption as it is common for network insiders to engage in influence peddling for the benefit of other members. Government officials and politicians are able to influence official policy decisions in exchange for kickbacks or illicit funds from businesses. With the state maintaining strong regulatory power over business, the latter invest in cultivating supportive relations with decision-makers in the public sector. The 2015 Sung Wan-jong scandal is an excellent example. The construction tycoon committed suicide, leaving behind a note with a list of politicians he claimed to have bribed in the course of his business dealings. This scandal led to the resignation of the newly-appointed Prime Minister. Recently, South Korea introduced a strong anti-graft law in an effort to curtail the culture of corruption-prone gifting and sponsorship. This law applies to virtually everyone and is expected to be more effective than any previous grand anti-corruption laws by fundamentally altering people's conventional gift giving and receiving behaviours.

Nevertheless, legal measures cannot prevent colossal scandals like the one currently engulfing the President. Korean presidents are very powerful, having control over the prosecutor's offices, the police and monitoring agencies. Unless these watchdog organisations become truly independent from the Blue House, the abuse of power or corruption by

the president and/or their entourage will remain unchecked. This is the reason a large number of lawmakers are pushing to change South Korea's constitution in order to limit the power of the presidential office. Changes to the power structure should be applied to private organisations as well as public sector. Control by a single person at the top is vulnerable to power abuse and corruption.

While South Korean civil society has progressed to a liberal and plural democracy, powerful institutions lag behind, and authoritarian leadership is still prevalent. South Korea should seize upon the unfortunate, critical momentum generated by this scandal to reform its governing system and achieve authentic, high-quality democracy. ■

— Sook Jong Lee is president of the East Asia Institute and professor of public administration at Sungkyunkwan University. Currently, she holds advisory positions in the South Korean government, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Unification, and Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA).