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Impeaching the Queen, Korean Style

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The Korean National Assembly voted to impeach President Park Geun-hye on December 9th last year. Since then, Park was suspended from power and the nation is waiting for the Constitutional Court to hand down the ruling that would finalize the impeachment process, either to permanently remove Park from office or to reinstate her.

Among other things, perhaps what troubles Koreans most is the drastic uncertainty ahead. Most importantly, it is hard to predict how the Constitutional Court would rule on the case. One may conclude that there is fair chance the Court will rule against the impeachment since the ideological make up of the Court became quite conservative (with three recent appointments of the Justices by President Park herself) and considering the impeachment requires a supermajority of the Court (that is, the concurrence of six or more Justices out of nine). Yet, some believe the Constitutional Court cannot ignore the public opinion that was manifested in the size and intensity of the rallies that easily collected millions of people on the downtown streets of Seoul on Saturdays in the last couple of months. At least, the rallies succeeded in putting pressure to the National Assembly to vote for the impeachment with far more than the required supermajority.

Another source of uncertainty is on the political schedule. If the Constitutional Court rules for the impeachment, a by-election would have to take place in 60 days to choose the next Presi-

dent, as is stipulated by the Election Law of Korea. Without any transition period, the President-elect will swear into the office the day after the winner of the election is declared. If the Constitutional Court rules against the impeachment, Park will return to office to what is left of her presidency in which case the election is scheduled to take place in December. In short, we know there will be an election sometime this year: it is just that we do not know when it will take place.

Then, of course, we do not know who will be the next President, an uncertainty that is always a given in any democracies. Yet the level of uncertainty is not just about the candidates but more about the party system itself. Understandably, the ruling Saenuri Party, which represents the conservative voters, is imploding while opposing parties, such as the Democratic Party and the Peoples' Party seem to be in a better shape.

No parties or groups that claim to be on the conservative side have any viable presidential candidate yet, which perhaps gave rise to the possibility of presidential candidate Ban Ki-moon, who seems to be looking for a new job after his ten-year service as UN Secretary-General. He has consistently showed some strong poll numbers as a presidential candidate in recent years, and almost all the parties or groups in the middle or right of the ideological spectrum seem to be entertaining the possibility of putting him on their tickets.

The dilemma with Mr. Ban is that his

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popularity is based upon the assumption that he is an 'outsider' to politics and people know very little of his politics. As he returns to Korea and enters the political arena, Koreans might learn more about him as a politician and his numbers may go down. For exactly the same reason, it is difficult to forecast what his policies would be like: yet it is reasonable to assume that there will be fewer changes to the current policies.

The national mood is on the side with the Democratic Party, with by far the highest support in national polls, while Saenuri Party is suffering from the public wrath directed at President Park. Moon Jae-in of the Democratic Party, who lost the presidential election to Park in 2012, is showing very strong numbers in the polls leading the field. Some would even argue that the election is for him to lose if he loses, and that an early election will benefit him most. There are other candidates such as Lee Jae-myung whose popularity rose sharply recently, but will face a tall task of getting the party nomination. In any case, when the election takes place, or when the impeachment ruling comes down will matter.

If Mr. Moon, or any candidates from the opposition parties take office, we may expect to see some serious changes or repeals on a wide variety of policies, or at least a close examination of the decisions that were made during the Park Administration. Of course, these will depend on whether and when the impeachment is upheld in the Constitutional Court; on how the current parties divide and merge to shape a new party system; and on what types of electoral coalition or coordination takes places between parties and/or groups.

There are still things that are clear and tangible. During the rallies Korean citizens learned that there are *many* other fellow citizens who agree to the notions that Korean statism from the past century that attempts to discipline the

civil society cannot be tolerated any longer and that such government should be thrown away. They succeeded in suspending the presidency by getting the legislature to listen to them; they can smell some serious changes are immanent as well, either in the Constitutional Court or in the next election. ■

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