Park’s Stunning Fall May Open the Door for Opposition Victory

Following weeks of massive street protests, Park Geun-hye, South Korea’s first female president, has been impeached by a vote in the country’s national assembly over accusations of extortion, bribery, abuses of power, leaking confidential government documents and violating the constitution.

Park has governed high-handedly with a secretive style of leadership that has stoked public curiosity in her closely guarded personal life. She campaigned on reducing income inequality and expanding welfare but emerged adrift as a bland center-right defender of the status quo.

She came to power in early 2013, supported at the ballot box by mainly senior citizens who saw her as channeling the legacy of her late father, the military dictator Park Chung-hee, often associated with modernization, rapid growth and authoritarianism.

The scandal that precipitated Park’s spectacular downfall is rooted in allegations that her longtime personal friend and confidant, Choi Soon-sil, exerted an inordinate amount of influence over government policies, edited the president’s speeches and even influenced government appointments.

Choi, a civilian with no security clearance, was found to illegally possess confidential government documents. Park also personally lobbied corporations like Samsung and Hyundai to make massive financial contributions to charitable organisations controlled by Choi.

Adding to the salaciousness, Korean media reports claim Choi’s father was a spiritual mentor to Park because of his alleged ability to communicate with the spirit of her assassinated mother and induce trance-like experiences.

Relations with North Korea have reached their nadir under her hawkish foreign policy, symbolized by the closure of the Kaesong Industrial Complex and the suspension of all inter-Korean cooperation and channels for emergency communication between north and south.

She has brought lawsuits for defamation against journalists and engineered the dissolution of the far-left United Progressive Party, ousting elected parliamentarians on the pretext that the party was intent on realizing North Korean-style socialism, when in actuality they held critical views of US military presence in their country and advocated détente with Pyongyang.

Park’s primary foreign policy overture was an extended charm offensive to the Chinese leadership in an attempt to persuade President Xi Jinping to cooperate more fully with Seoul on pressuring North Korea over its nuclear program.

China responded by initially strengthening ties with South Korea, but relations have soured considerably after Seoul agreed to deploy the sophisticated American missile defense system known as Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) on its territory.
Despite mass public opposition inside South Korea against THAAD deployment, Seoul’s conservative establishment says the system will counter Pyongyang’s nuclear ambitions. China, wary of American military presence near its borders, believes it is the true target of the missile defense system and says the move would impede its security interests.

From mishandling the government’s response to a capsized ferry that killed hundreds to a row about whitewashing her father’s legacy in school textbooks, Park’s advocacy of THAAD and her pro-American security orientation has made her deeply unpopular at home while hindering trust and cooperation with China, her country’s biggest trading partner.

After the impeachment vote, Park’s powers were suspended and Hwang Kyo-ahn, her staunch ally and prime minister, was made the acting president. The country’s Constitutional Court must now consider whether to endorse Park’s impeachment, a process which could still take months.

Park has indicated that she would fight the impeachment process, making no mention of a voluntary resignation. Her removal now requires six of the nine Constitutional Court judges, at least six of which were appointed by Park or her predecessor, Lee Myung-bak.

Should the Constitutional Court judges vote in favour of her impeachment, a new presidential election will be held within 60 days. Park will attempt to survive the ruling of the country’s highest judiciary and see out her term, though the results of the impeachment vote in the assembly indicate that nearly half of the 128 lawmakers in her party oppose her.

Park’s impeachment comes at a time of great uncertainty about the incoming Trump administration and its stance on North Korea and the future of the US-South Korea military alliance. Should the ruling conservative party be thrust into a new presidential election, it will attempt to distance itself from Park, though after two consecutive unpopular administrations, this will be a hard sell to voters.

In many ways, the street protests calling for Park’s resignation – the largest in the country’s history with over 1.7 million in attendance – is a rejection not of a singular figure, but of the conservative establishment that has governed for most of the pre- and post-democracy period and its close relationship with the elite business conglomerates that dominate the South Korean economy.

Polls indicate that Moon Jae-in, opposition leader with the Democratic Party, is the most popular presidential contender. The ascension of the liberal opposition, which has traditionally favored dialogue and economic cooperation with Pyongyang, could have a positive effect on inter-Korean relations.

Given the enormous controversy around THAAD, a liberal administration could build a strong electoral platform in opposition to its deployment, especially if the Trump administration pressures the South Korean government for preferential trade arrangements or hard compensation for US military expenditure in South Korea.

There is much speculation that Ban Ki-moon, whose term as UN Secretary General expires in January 2017, will run, though he has yet to confirm or deny his intentions. This would be a formidable challenge for the opposition due to Ban’s stature and prestige as a global diplomatic figure, widely viewed among Koreans as having experience and integrity.

Ban is seen as representing a continuity of the incumbent party’s policies and would likely side with Park’s conservatives should he run. Whatever the outcome, it is difficult to imagine a potential Ban Ki-moon presidency as anything other than the caretaking of a stale political order. In an age of electoral upsets for establishment parties, the movement that has coalesced in opposition to Park may still make its mark at the ballot box.

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