

## Where Is Korea Going?

by  
In Ho Lee

### Abstract

Korea's National Assembly in December 2016 impeached Park Geun-hye, the first woman president they had proudly elected. This essay chronicles in detail how a minor scandal involving the president's wardrobe manager was stage-managed by the opposition and the scandal-mongering media to develop into massive protest rallies climaxing in the historic impeachment. The author highlights President Park's own perception that she was framed: by the criminals around Choi who sought to make quick money by taking advantage of the woman assistant's easy access to the President, and, more importantly, by her political and ideological foes who seized the opportunity to topple not just Park Geun-hye but also the strongly anti-communist government system she fought so hard to uphold.

South Korea has never been so sharply divided as now. The conservative sector, at first stupefied, and then alarmed by the haste with which the impeachment voting was pushed, realized that under attack was not only the astounded president but the liberal democratic system itself, and started to come out, holding the national flag, in place of the candlelight, urging the besieged Constitutional Court to reject the impeachment vote.

The defensive action started a little too late. As if the adoption by the Court were a foregone conclusion, presidential hopefuls already started to move and the front runner, Moon Jae-in, is threatening the country with a civil war in case the Constitutional Court rejected the National Assembly decision. The fate of Korea hangs on the decision of judges too frightened to exercise their free will.

The so-called Choi Soon-sil Gate, which has been rocking the Korean nation for the past six months, at first seemed just a cheap, juicy political scandal. But it has developed, going far beyond a mere scandal. Park Geun-hye, the first female president of Korea, has been impeached by the National Assembly. As Koreans await the verdict of the constitutional court, the country is on the verge of civil war. Many are wondering whether South Korea will survive as a liberal democratic nation.

It began as a minor tabloid story. The press accused the head of Ewha University, the largest women's university in the world, of admitting the daughter of a wealthy woman named Choi Soon-sil only because of the rich mother's influence. When the university retorted, saying that the young woman had won her place because she was a gold medalist in horseback-riding, the media sensed a story. Day and night Korean television showed an immaculately dressed young woman riding a horse. It was then rumored that expensive horses had been bought for her by Samsung. The story grew: here was proof that one needed money and influence, not talent or effort, to get into top universities. Then the public was suddenly informed that Choi was a long-time confidante of President Park and that two foundations which President Park had recently set up, ostensibly to promote Korean culture and sports, had actually been designed to benefit Choi and her horseback-riding daughter. The press claimed this immoral woman's influence over the President was so great that she was allowed even to edit the President's speeches and to plant nominees in key government posts. Since President Park, a single woman with no family, had placed Choi in charge of her wardrobe and other personal matters, the President kept Choi's assignment unofficial and secret, providing further grounds for suspicion of illegal collusion.

The Korean public, her supporters and critics alike, were disgusted and stupefied. Already suffering from sliding popularity and early lame-duck status after her party's devastating defeat in the National Assembly election earlier in spring, President Park was vulnerable. The media piled on, calling the scandal an "unheard of tampering in national governance," "a clear breach of faith the nation had placed in the president," and "a violation of democratic principles."

People, including many disappointed former supporters of President Park, egged on by left-wing politicians and media, piled out into the streets for a candlelight protest. When the President gave only a short apology for what she deemed was regrettable thoughtlessness on her part, the demonstrators' mood changed from disappointment to anger. The media and opposition politicians alike saw their opportunity to push for an early removal of the President; here was an emotionally powerful incident that could rally a growing dissident base. The candlelight protest was dubbed a new landmark in peaceful popular revolution, allegedly reflecting Korea's democratic coming of age, a change to cleanse what they termed the "autocratic power" wielded by the President. The media, especially the privately owned television media, knowing that scandals are good for their bottom lines,

started savagely digging in to President Park's personal life, to the embarrassment and shame of the President's earlier supporters and glee of her foes.

Shame is a thing Koreans as a nation cannot tolerate. The candlelight crowd began to shout for the immediate resignation of the President. The public prosecutor's office had already started looking into bribery and corruption charges in connection with President Park's efforts to solicit contributions from business groups to help with two foundations she had started – a customary practice in Korea when launching such semi-governmental projects. The prosecution quickly announced, without having questioned the President herself, that it suspected the President's collusion in the illegal use of government power. Since an incumbent president cannot be indicted except for treason or its equivalent, the National Assembly called for an investigation by a special prosecutor, to be recommended by the majority party, meaning the opposition.

As the candlelight protests escalated into a Saturday ritual in which tens of thousands participated, the popular slogan changed from "resignation" to "impeachment." President Park offered to resign on terms both warring political parties agreed upon; her proposal was rejected. The opposition-dominated National Assembly, without waiting for the findings of the special prosecutor just appointed, hastily drew up an impeachment bill. It was passed with a surprisingly large number of the President's own party joining the opposition.

President Park was charged with grossly violating the constitution and other laws of the country. Besides extortion of bribery from the top business leaders, and violation of the constitutional rights of free expression by blocking certain artists from government support programs, there was the ludicrous charge that she had failed to live up to her obligation to safeguard the lives of the Korean people because she could not account for the seven hours she had spent before arriving at the scene of a ferryboat accident in which hundreds of passengers, mostly high school students, tragically perished. As crowds clamored for her resignation, President Park's popularity rating fell to 5%. When the National Assembly met, they did not even bother to vote on the fourteen specific charges separately. In a hurried and secretive summary vote, President Park Geun-Hye was impeached and swiftly stripped of her status as president. Prime Minister Hwang Kyo-an assumed the duties of president pro tem, pending the final ruling by the constitutional court.

In the meantime, as the initial shock and anger at the remorseful president subsided, thoughtful Koreans began to feel concerned about the speed with which the government system was being crippled. Within a few weeks, the prosecution had many key members of the Park administration interrogated and incarcerated. The extreme mudslinging by the media was also disturbing to the conservative wing of Korean society, as were the overtly revolutionary slogans which began popping up more and more in the midst of the continuing candlelight marches. The class war mentality reflected in many of the demonstrators' slogans had the effect of awakening people who normally remained politically aloof. While they were angry

with President Park for her political failings, they felt embarrassed and outraged by the savage manner in which the media were probing into the lady president's personal life day and night, week after week, without any effort to distinguish facts from rumors. Even ordinary citizens began to wonder if the President's failings were serious enough to justify such an extreme measure as impeachment.

The silent majority felt especially stunned and betrayed when the President's own party gave in to the pressure of the media and the crowds and joined the opposition party in the impeachment voting. These were men and women who had landed in the National Assembly on Park Geun-Hye's wings.

The roughshod manner in which the special prosecutor, appointed solely by the opposition parties, conducted the investigation began to conjure up images of a one-party mass dictatorship. When the prosecutor had the former head of the presidential administration and an incumbent minister of culture detained and interrogated like common criminals and in addition demanded an arrest warrant for the de facto head of Samsung, many Koreans, regardless of their political leanings, began to feel that the very fabric of Korea was falling apart – not because of the abuse of power by the President, but because of the assault on the government system by the dictatorial National Assembly, aided by venal and biased media.

The conservative part of the population, especially the older generation with personal memories of the hardships of the Korean War, resented the press anointing the candlelight demonstrators as “the nation.” Those who had remained silent for nearly two months after the outbreak of the Choi scandal, began to fear that behind the strangely jovial candlelight demonstrations there might well be a serious conspiracy to overturn the Republic. The silent middle could remain silent no longer. They started to come out and demonstrate against impeachment, waving the Korean national flag, taegukki, or wrapping it around themselves. Their numbers quickly swelled beyond anyone's expectations. Occasionally the star-spangled banner could be noticed in the midst of the taegukki-wavers because most Koreans who feel that the Republic is under attack see the Korean-American alliance as the mainstay of Korea's defense and security.

By the end of January the taegukki-waving crowd far outnumbered the candlelighters, though the press was slow to note this. Nor were they eager to present important new evidence which the prosecutor's office was pressured to release belatedly. It seemed to suggest that the Choi affair was indeed an overblown offshoot of a criminal scheme in which a few young crooks in the entourage of Choi tried to make some quick money by taking advantage of her vaunted influence over President Park. Hoping to divert attention from their own financial double-dealing, they sold pre-recorded visual evidence of Choi's relationship with the President to an already rapacious press. Damaging information was leaked to the hungry media bit by bit, until the floodgates burst open at the end of October.

As of now, uncertainty reigns. If the constitutional court approves the impeachment bill, a new president could be elected as early as May. Those who wanted to be in the race have already started running. But the possibility of the constitutional court ruling against the impeachment cannot be ruled out. Either way, the nation is so sharply divided over this issue that massive resistance and violent clashes may well result.

Many people feel that the existing political parties no longer adequately represent them. There is no political party or strong presidential candidate to represent the taegukki-waving crowd, the vast ordinary citizenry disgusted with politics in general and driven to the streets by their worries. Nor has anyone yet drawn up a well-formulated conservative platform, though slowly it seems to be dawning on conservatives that they have been too complacent, perhaps too selfish, and that somehow when they weren't looking, the country began to fracture apart.

Largely because of government indifference to the plight of the poor, especially since the economic and financial crisis of 1997-98, this once staunchly anti-communist country has experienced an increasingly sharp drift to the left. Many now sense that the entire system of government has been penetrated by North Korean agents and their South Korean fellow travelers. But that can be talked about only in hushed voices, lest one be accused of harboring a cold war right-wing mentality. Strangely enough, the threatening example of North Korea is conveniently set aside by Korea's left.

The person singularly responsible for occasioning the Choi Soon-sil scandal and bringing the nation to the brink of civil war clearly is the President herself. But without the determination shown by dissident or opportunistic politicians and media to exploit the scandal in their narrow self-interest, the situation could not have come to this impasse.

No one disputed the President's sense of dedication to the service of her country. Unlike many of her predecessors, she was free from suspicion of personal corruption. But the aloofness stemming from her innate sense of mission was both a source of strength and a fatal weakness. From the earliest months, she was rumored to shy away even from her ministers and supporters and spend evenings alone except for state dinners. The President hardly ever met with the press, and "failure to communicate" was a well-grounded complaint. However, in spite of President Park's reluctance to communicate in person even with her close supporters, her popularity rating was in the high 60's throughout her first year. The fear that Korea was not ready for a woman president quickly dissipated. President Park did well in maintaining Korea's international standing and in tightening the security system vis-à-vis North Korea. She succeeded, against odds, in having the notorious Tongjin Party outlawed as a political party. With an acronym of RO, this underground revolutionary organization operating in the guise of a political party had succeeded in having several of its members elected to the National Assembly.

But President Park's success against RO was to be her downfall, since her ideological enemies would never forgive her.

The turning point in the President's fortune was the Sewolho ferryboat accident which occurred in the second year of her administration. The President was blamed for not having saved more lives, despite the fact that the boat had already overturned by the time she received the mistaken report that most passengers had been saved. The owners of the shipping company and the crew got off relatively easily, but not the President. The Sewolho incident sparked an irrational anti-government frenzy which gripped opposition politics. Ever since, President Park's popularity kept falling.

Investigations conducted variously by the criminal prosecution, special prosecutor, and the constitutional court have not yet resulted in any court proceedings. Yet that did not prevent the media, especially some privately-owned television channels, from handling the Choi scandal as if the impeachment and subsequent criminal proceedings against President Park were foregone conclusions. The cardinal principle of assuming innocence until proven guilty was being summarily violated.

When taegukki-holding groups started to appear in small numbers, the embarrassed media and politicians tried to ignore the new phenomenon, belittling it as a desperate last-ditch effort on the part of the crippled President to mobilize her hardcore admirers. But when their numbers swelled rapidly to outnumber the other side and the demands included dissolution of the "irresponsible and dictatorial" National Assembly, it became impossible to sustain the image of the entire Korean nation rising up against President Park. The anti-impeachment side was greatly encouraged by a brilliantly reasoned constitutional argument against impeachment provided by Kim Pyong-woo, a former president of the Korean Association of Attorneys who had retired to the United States but returned to Korea to lead the movement. He pointed out that those who are impeaching the president on the grounds of violating freedom of expression have actually filed with the National Assembly a number of bills which, if allowed to be enacted, would have the effect of placing the media totally under the control of the National Assembly, or leftist labor unions. Even the freedom of academic debate would come to an end. This is why some taegukki-holders, especially those who have had personal brushes with communist dictatorship, believe it is better to die fighting for freedom and the preservation of the liberal Republic than to be swept under a populist dictatorship waving the flag of class war.

On the other hand, the candlelight holders, together with their favorite presidential hopeful, Moon Jae-in, have openly been advocating a mass revolution, should they fail to achieve their goal of bringing about regime change through impeachment. Regime change, not just a change of presidential administration, is what the extreme left seeks, and that is precisely what frightens their opponents. Tension between the two opposing sides runs so high that the justices of the constitutional court and the special prosecutor have been placed under protection by the security police.

In a certain sense President Park Geun-hye rode to power on the name and legacy of her father, President Park Chung-hee, the anti-communist dictator and economic miracle worker. Now she is being asked to pay for it. She is taken to task not because she failed to carry on his political legacy but because she tried to honor it to the letter, neglecting to take into account the enormous changes which had taken place since his time, especially in the political and ideological consciousness of the Korean people. Suppression of intellectual freedom was one of the unfortunate hallmarks of Park Chung-hee's regime, which came to power through a coup d'état on an anti-communist revolutionary platform. And that policy of suppression and its long-term consequences – ignorance, anger and vengeful greed for power by the intellectual demi-monde – is backfiring with a ferocity savage enough to engulf not only the positive legacy Park Chung-hee left but also the honor and safety of his own daughter.

In the only interview President Park Geun-hye gave since her impeachment, shown only on a private internet channel, she expressed her belief that she had been framed by a well-prepared scheme. Evidence which came to public light after the impeachment voting and which neither the media nor the prosecutor's office seems eager to highlight, indicates that she had been targeted on at least two different levels for quite some time. At the lower and more immediate level was the machination of the swindlers in Choi's entourage who tried to make some quick money by taking advantage of the intimacy between the President and Choi. But by far the more serious conspiracy with deep historical roots was the one in which all the political and ideological foes of President Park were united in their aim of paralyzing her administration and eventually bringing her down.

Between the President and her determined ideological opponents stood the opportunistic politicians of the President's own party and ideologically innocent but politically interested citizenry. Both could be manipulated by the left-leaning mass media in ways inconceivable only a decade ago. False or biased information travels just as easily as genuine knowledge. Once the damage is done, there is little chance of undoing it.

While the nation is waiting for the decision by the constitutional court, the front-runner among the president hopefuls is a man who has consistently denied the foundation on which the republic of Korea stands, that it is a country which won its independence as an anti-communist liberal democracy on August 15, 1948. He is said to have counseled President Roh Moo-hyun to consult North Korea first before voting on the North Korea Human Rights Bills in the United Nations Assembly. He says that the first country he will visit, should he be elected president, is North Korea.

Another indication of the direction in which Korea is drifting at this moment, with its captain under house arrest, is the news that intellectual leaders of the radical left wing, including a former president of Ewha University, have publicly launched a

project to publish a “Biographical Dictionary of Violators of the Constitution.” Included in the list of some four hundred entries are the names of six presidents of the Republic, some former chief justices, heads of the constitutional court – and the founding president of Korea, Dr. Syngman Rhee.

Who would have thought that a country with per capita income exceeding \$30,000 would still hanker after a populist revolution and turn what could have been just an embarrassing power scandal into a major national issue bordering on civil war? In terms of national image and interest, the cost involved in dealing with what was termed a gross breach of democratic principles and abuse of presidential power has far surpassed the possible damage which could have resulted from President Park’s mistakenly-placed confidence in Choi.

With the constitutional court decision expected to come any moment, the hope that Korea will be spared a violent popular clash and possible backsliding into a leftist popular dictatorship lies, in the first instance, with the wisdom and integrity of the judges. But ultimately Korea’s fate will be decided by the people, the sovereign voters. If Korea’s much-vaunted success in economic and political development has bred a genuine understanding of the value of democracy and the moral and economic strength to back up political beliefs with action, the nation will be able to overcome this historic crisis and be given a new opportunity to build a freer and fairer society capable of extending its benefits to its North Korean counterpart. The theory or assumption which many social scientists and politicians share that a country past a certain level of per capita income is immune to temptation of a violent socialist revolution will be sorely tested in Korea.