

Nationwide candlelights mobilisation: South Korea shaken by new civic revolution

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1.5 million-strong candlelit vigil in Seoul, part of nationwide mobilisation of 1.9 million people on November 26.

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South Korea is currently in a vortex of an unprecedented political crisis.

President Park Geun-hye is under huge pressure to resign after a series of exposures of her shameful scandals related to Choi Soonshil, her friend of 40 years and daughter of Reverend Choi Tae-min who allegedly dominated a young Park after the 1975 assassination of her mother.

Every day, the media is running stories on all the scandals and corruption allegations. Meanwhile, people are still angry with Park's indifference toward the victims of the 2014 Sewol Ferry disaster, mostly young high school students on a school trip to Jeju island.

Immediately after the accident, Park was missing for seven hours. So far, she and her cohorts have refused to tell the truth. Only recently, the Blue House, the presidential residency, publicised some information, which looks untrue.

So far, citizens have held a series of huge candlelight rallies. These culminated in the November 26 rally, which gathered more than 1.9 million people nationwide, including 1.5 million in downtown Seoul, to demand Park resign immediately.

Return to dictatorship?

In December 2012, Park won the presidential election as the candidate of the conservative Saenuri Party, beating Moon Jae-in, the candidate of the liberal Democratic Party. The margin was narrow (3.6%).

Park was the first president to win a majority votes since direct elections were introduced in 1987, when a new democracy was born in South Korea after three decades of struggles for democratisation.

Park had substantial support from older, conservative people nostalgic for her father, ex-dictator Park Chunghee. These old generations and the New Right extremists regard him as a national saviour who salvaged South Koreans from long-running poverty.

Park's voters had high expectations for her, especially because of economic hardships and growing economic polarisation under long years of neoliberalism.

In spite of substantial support, Park's presidency has been filled with troubles. Her electoral victory was in doubt because agents of the National Information Service got involved in the presidential campaign by spreading misinformation against the opposition candidate.

Her right-wing agenda and incomprehensible decisions made people angry, fuelled by such things as the Sewol Ferry incident; the sudden stoppage of North-South cooperation; the Blue House document leak scandal; the publication plan for government-sanctioned history textbook; the agreement with the Japanese government on the so-called comfort women; the decision to deploy THAAD missile system in Korea; and the murder of Baek Namgi, a 66-year-old farmer activist by the police water cannon last year.

Many of the government policies seemed out of context. Her motto of the "creative economy" and her remark that Korean reunification is a longshot are curiosities that one nobody can explain or understand, not even herself.

Her personal style of hidden solitude created an image of a lonely princess, impossible to communicate with. Her personal wish to relegitimise her father's achievements provoked huge repulsion from the victims of political repression under Park Chughee's dictatorship.

Fundamentally, doubts about her personal qualification as a political leader have been a constant source of rumours and suspicion.

Showdown

The turning point was the general election in May. At first, the ruling Saenuri Party was expected to triumph overwhelmingly because of the poor performance of a divided opposition. However, in the course of the candidate selection and election campaign, the ruling party was divided between pro-Park and non-Park factions.

After the pro-Park leaders' arrogance and irregularities, as well as a purge of the rival faction, the opposition parties won a majority in spite of their own divisions.

After the election, the internal dispute within the Saenuri Party got worse. The pro-Park faction won the party leadership despite internal and external criticisms. The conservative media was critical toward the pro-Park faction's domination, even before the election. However, its advice for Park was easily ignored and Park attacked the conservative Daily Chosun over a bribery issue.

At that point, the Daily Chosun withdrew its support for the Park government. On the surface, the conservative newspaper seemed to be in retreat and avoiding a direct confrontation with the government. However, the newspaper was readying to use its clout.

On October 26, Park's link with Choi was exposed by cable TV network JTBC, which exposed the shocking news that Choi's tablet PC contained scores of official documents leaked from the Blue House. This crucial evidence finally confirmed the rumours about Park as a puppet of Choi.

It was made clear that Choi read many Blue House documents and drafts of Park's speeches. Behind Park stood Choi, who controlled the president. Even Park's and her personal aides at the Blue House were picked by Choi and her ex-husband Jung Yun-hoi.

These exposures were led by cable networks and newspapers. TVChosun, JTBC and Channel A led harsh attacks on Park's government, together with the Daily Chosun, the Daily Chungang and Daily Donga, South Korea's three major conservative dailies that own the cable networks. Besides from JTBC, all the other newspapers and networks are conservative pro-government agencies, having supported Park until early this year.

The president of JTBC's news reporting division is high profile news anchor Sohn Seokhee, who led the coverage of the Sewol Ferry disaster from the perspective of victims and came to be highly regarded. When he took the job at JTBC, he was harshly criticised for joining the Samsung-sponsored network. It was a Faustian deal, but Sohn showed his gamble could pay off, even in the mouth of a tiger.

For almost a month, all the TV networks and daily newspapers have been bombarding the nation with news on "Choi-Park Gate", revealing all the details of Choi's abuse of power and corruption.

For instance, Park collected the seed fund for two foundations, Mir Foundation and K Sports Foundation, from CEOs of seven major conglomerates, including Samsung, Hyundai, SK and Lotte. These donated more than KW80 billion (about \$A92 million) for Park and Choi's sinister projects.

Choi's daughter's school life and horse riding activities were another hot issue. Choi threatened teachers and professors in person, and her daughter Jung Yura enjoyed huge favours in school life, horse riding performances and even university admission. Jung's arrogant behaviour angered millions of young people and students.

Choi picked up a wide network of accomplices and won financial gains from diverse government-funded projects in sports and culture industries. She owned dozens of paper companies in Korea and Germany as a conduit for money laundering.

Choi's personal fortune was inherited from her father, Choi Taemin, who also accumulated a huge fortune by using his connections with Park. Decade-old reports on him documented by the National Intelligence Services have also been revealed.

Candlelights won't die

The exposure of so many political and personal scandals shocked the whole country. Popular support for Park plummeted. In spite of her strange behaviour, Park had enjoyed substantial support, mostly from older and conservative sectors. However, the shocking exposures meant that most have turned their backs on her.

In November, polls showed that her support was less than 5%, an unprecedented collapse in popularity. For nearly two months, her government has stopped functioning.

The candlelight protests have consistently demanded Park step down from the presidency. However, Park is refusing to listen. At first, surprised at the sudden exposure of her secrets, she gave two apology speeches on October 25 and November 4. But these speeches were no more than meagre excuses, refusing to recognise her responsibilities or need to tell the truth — thus provoking popular indignation even further.

South Korean indignados began to act. From late October, citizens organised candlelight rallies spontaneously all over the country. On November 5, the first huge rally was joined by 200,000 people. On November 12, more than 1 million candles were lit.

This date had been set as the Day for National Upsurge by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions and its allies. However, candle-carrying citizens overwhelmed organised labour. This rally was regarded as the biggest since 1987, when three-week-long mobilisations brought down the Chun Doo-hwan dictatorship and won democracy.

November 19 rallies were planned for major cities nationally. The rally in Seoul was joined by about 700,000 people, and nationally, about 1 million people with candles gathered in more than 75 cities.

On November 20, prosecutors filed an official suit against Choi, and other Blue House assistants, for power abuse, coercion and bribery. The prosecution also designated Park as an accomplice to the crimes, though she refused to cooperate with the prosecution's investigation, contrary to her promise to do so.

On November 26, 1.9 million angry people with candles gathered again in spite of bad weather. The 1.5 million-strong rally in Seoul set a new record and put the strongest pressure on Park and wavering opposition parties.

On the way to the final victory, popular mobilisation has been essential to complete a civic revolution. Not institutional politics, but the voices in streets and squares dominated over the opportunistic manoeuvrings of the opposition parties. People in streets and squares have demanded Park step down immediately.

However, the radical left outside of the institutional politics is so marginalised that revolutionary voices are hardly audible. A badly weakened labour movement is at a loss as to how to intervene in the candlelight struggle, even under its militant leadership.

A broad coalition of social and civic movements has also played a limited role of event organisers. The framework has been set, unfortunately, by the conservative media's hegemony.

Faced with these unprecedented scandals, the ruling Saenuri Party has gone into a terminal crisis. However, its leader Lee Junghyun has tried everything to defend Park, though his own leadership has been severely weakened.

The non-Park factions joined the opposition, criticising Park and the party leadership. Some went as far as demanding the impeachment of Park and the re-creation of their party.

On the other hand, the two main opposition parties have criticised the Park government and demanded her resignation. However, the opposition avoided fully joining the candlelight marches and were reluctant to initiate the impeachment process.

The Democratic Party has 123 seats and the People's Party 38 seats against Saenuri's 122 in the 300 seat parliament. More than 200 votes are needed to impeach the president.

Thus, the opposition needs at least 30 votes from the Saenuri Party, as well as six from the Progress Justice Party that outlived its pro-North Korea rival, the United Progressive Party. The UPP was dispersed by a constitutional court ruling in 2014 and its key leaders jailed under the notorious National Security Law.

A November 21 meeting of opposition leaders discussed an impeachment process. Given Park's resignation seems impossible, the opposition has no other choice but to take the impeachment course.

Facing this critical juncture, with impeachment looking inevitable, Park made her final speech on

November 29, saying she would step down according to a procedure to be agreed on in parliament. Although she mentioned her retreat for the first time, her intention is not clear and the oppositions is still seeking to initiate impeachment.

Thus, though millions of candlelight protesters forced the presidential resignation, the concrete process of her stepdown is still uncertain. The political leaders of both the ruling and opposition parties remain watched by the doubtful eyes of indignant candlelights.

For now, the situation is still highly volatile. As the final victory is still a step away, December will feature more candle light mobilisations. However, restoring and deepening democracy is a huge political task beyond the mobilisation of millions of candle-carrying protesters or the political process in parliament.

This is definitely another huge victory of people power, but the mobilisation was trapped within the framework of non-violent, peaceful protests that the conservative media preached obsessively. This great civil revolution, however, is not over. South Koreans will soon be faced with another battle against the neoliberal agenda pushed by the conservative media and its politicians.

In spite of its limits, the 2016 candlelight revolution is another step in the Korean people's historical insurgency for democracy. It follows the proud predecessors of the April 1960 Revolution, the Gwangju Uprising in 1980, the June Uprising and Workers' Great Struggle in 1987, the general strike in 1996-1997, and the 2008 Candlelight Uprising.

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P.S.

* Green Left n° 1121. Saturday, December 3, 2016:

<https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/south-korea-shaken-new-civic-revolution>

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