

South Korean President Park Geun-hye Removed from Power by Constitutional Court

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Park Geun-hye: South Korean court removes president over scandal

Park loses immunity from prosecution over corruption claims after constitutional judges uphold impeachment vote.

Park Geun-hye has become the first democratically elected South Korean president to be forced from office, after the country's constitutional court upheld a parliamentary vote to impeach her over a corruption and cronyism scandal that could see her face criminal charges.

Friday's dramatic judgement brings an abrupt and ignominious end to Park's four years in office – the most dramatic development yet in a scandal that has gripped and horrified South Koreans in equal measure. Two died in protests after the ruling.

Park will immediately forfeit the executive immunity she enjoyed as president, meaning prosecutors can summon, question and possibly arrest her.

South Korea has 60 days to elect a new leader after the court's eight justices unanimously supported the impeachment motion, passed overwhelmingly in December by the national assembly, which accused Park of extortion, bribery, abuse of power and leaking government secrets [\[1\]](#).

The election, likely to be on 9 May, could see a liberal installed after almost a decade of conservative rule and at a time of increasing tension on the Korean peninsula [\[2\]](#) and in the wider Asia-Pacific region.

Opinion polls show that Moon Jae-in, a former MP from the opposition Democratic party of Korea who lost the 2012 election to Park, is the favourite to succeed her. Moon has called for talks with North Korea in contrast to Park's hard line against Pyongyang, and has vowed to "reconsider" Park's plans to deploy a US missile defence system, amid objections from Beijing.

China's official Xinhua news agency wasted no time in responding to Park's impeachment and accused her of dealing "a massive blow to [South Korea's] relationship with Beijing" by agreeing to host the Thaad missile system [\[3\]](#). It said the deployment was "very likely to usher in an ice age" for economic ties between China and South Korea, and urged Park's successor to rethink.

North Korea's state news agency, KCNA, said Park "had one more year left as 'president' but, now she's been ousted, she will be investigated as a common criminal".

The ruling against Park was delivered live on television on Friday morning amid tight security in the streets outside the constitutional court in Seoul.

While many in the crowd celebrated, thousands of Park's supporters reacted angrily, striking police officers with flag poles and climbing on to buses that were being used to form a cordon around the court.

"This is a victory of democracy," said 27-year-old Ahn Yo-Wool.

Lim Na-kyung, a student, said: "The impeachment of the president is a day that will go down in history. My heart is full of emotion and I am very happy."

South Korean media reported that two people died during scuffles between pro- and anti-Park protesters. A man in his 70s, believed to be a Park supporter, reportedly died from head injuries after falling from a police bus. Another man is believed to have died after hospital staff administered CPR.

The chief justice, Lee Jung-Mi, started reading the verdict shortly after 11am. The president's actions had "seriously impaired the spirit of ... democracy and the rule of law", she said. "President Park Geun-Hye ... has been dismissed. Her actions betrayed the people's confidence. They are a grave violation of law, which cannot be tolerated."

The acting president, Hwang Kyo-ahn, who took charge in December after Park's powers were frozen, called on his administration to close the deep divisions the scandal had created among South Koreans.

"I respect the constitutional court's decision ... The cabinet should carry out state affairs in a stable way and manage social order to prevent internal conflict from intensifying," he told a cabinet meeting.

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Park is the most unpopular South Korean leader since the country became a democracy in the late 1980s. The scandal ensnared senior government officials and business figures, including Lee Jae-yong, the acting head of Samsung, who denied bribery, corruption and other charges at the first hearing in his trial on Thursday.

But for South Koreans who reacted to the scandal last summer by protesting in their millions every weekend, Park, the daughter of a former South Korean dictator, was always the prize target.

Her impeachment came after months of deeply damaging revelations about her relationship with Choi Soon-sil, a longtime friend with whom she is suspected of conspiring to secure donations worth tens of millions of dollars from major companies for foundations set up by Choi.

She is also accused of allowing Choi to secretly interfere in state affairs, including economic policy and Seoul's relations with North Korea.

Samsung donated 43bn won (£30m) - more than any other firm - to the foundations and allegedly gave millions of euros to Choi to fund her daughter's equestrian training in Germany. The firm has strongly denied allegations that it expected political favours from Park in return.

Choi is in detention, accused of using her close ties with Park to force local firms to "donate" nearly

\$70m (£60m) to the non-profit foundations, which Choi allegedly used for personal gain.

Park and Choi have repeatedly denied any wrongdoing.

On Friday, the court found Park had broken the law by allowing Choi to interfere in state affairs, and had breached rules on public servants' activities.

"Park concealed completely Choi's meddling in state affairs and denied it whenever suspicions over the act emerged and even criticised those who raised the suspicions," Lee said.

Park, whose family background [4] and knack for winning elections propelled her to the Blue House on a wave of public support in late 2012, will leave office almost a year shy of the end of her five-year term.

Choi's father, the religious cult leader Choi Tae-min, mentored Park after her mother, Yuk Young-soo, was assassinated by a North Korean sympathiser in 1974, forcing the 22-year-old Park to take on the role of acting first lady. Her father, Park Chung-hee, was killed by his own chief of security five years later.

Public anger is now expected to focus again on the political influence – and extraordinary wealth – enjoyed by the the most powerful figures in South Korea's family-run conglomerates, or chaebol.

There are growing demands for legal action to be taken against tycoons from other South Korean companies caught up in the scandal, including Hyundai and Lotte.

Park is not the first South Korean leader to have been impeached by the national assembly. The liberal president, Roh Moo-hyun, was impeached in 2004, but was reinstated two months later after the constitutional court said allegations of minor election law violations and incompetence did not justify his removal.

Justin McCurry in Tokyo and agencies in Seoul

Why was Park impeached?

Park Geun-hye is the most prominent figure in a wide-ranging corruption and cronyism scandal that has gripped South Korea. She and her longtime confidante, Choi Soon-sil, are accused of conspiring to pressure companies, including Samsung, to donate large sums to two nonprofit foundations Choi set up. Choi is accused of using the money for personal gain, which she denies. Park admitted behaving "naively", but denies coercing companies.

Park is also accused of giving Choi unlawful access to state affairs and allowing her to influence policy, including Seoul's stance on North Korea's nuclear weapons programme.

* *The Guardian*. Friday 10 March 2017 08.34 GMT First published on Friday 10 March 2017 02.24 GMT:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/10/south-korea-president-park-geun-hye-constitutional-court-impeachment>

Park Geun-hye impeachment: what next for South Korea?

The president must leave office after the constitutional court backed her impeachment. But what does it mean for the country - and an unstable region?

What next for Park Geun-hye?

The constitutional court's unanimous decision to uphold parliament's impeachment vote against Park Geun-hye means she is no longer the country's president.

Aside from ending her presidency just under a year before her five-year term was due to expire in February 2018, the court's ruling means Park loses the immunity to criminal indictment she enjoyed for as long as she was president. Now she is no longer in power, prosecutors can summon, question and possibly arrest her.

Having become the first democratically elected South Korean leader to be ousted, Park now faces a nervous wait to discover whether she will face criminal proceedings.

What happens to the presidency?

Park will be immediately stripped of her powers and a presidential election must be held within 60 days. The consensus among local media is that voters will elect her successor on 9 May.

South Korea's prime minister, Hwang Kyo-ahn, who was appointed acting president after the national assembly's impeachment vote, will continue in that role until the election.

Why was she impeached?

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She and her longtime confidante, Choi Soon-sil, are accused of conspiring to pressure companies to donate large sums to two nonprofit foundations Choi set up. Samsung, by far the country's most famous company, is among those that donated close to US\$70m. Choi is accused of using the money for personal gain, which she denies.

Park admitted behaving "naively", but denies coercing companies. She has also denied claims that she granted her friend, who does not have security clearance, unlawful access to state affairs, and allowed her to influence policy, including Seoul's stance on North Korea's nuclear weapons programme.

How are South Koreans reacting?

Millions of people have taken to the streets in several cities since last year, calling for her impeachment.

Smaller pro-Park rallies have taken place in recent weeks, mainly involving older voters who recall with nostalgia her dictator father's role in encouraging South Korea's transformation into an Asian economic powerhouse.

Given the strength of public opinion and the seriousness of the accusations levelled against Park, a decision to reinstate her could have caused public unrest, with some anti-Park demonstrators threatening to start a "revolution".

What happens next in South Korea?

South Korea must elect a new president at a time of widespread anger at the state of the economy, and the influence wielded by its political and industrial elites.

Millions of anti-Park voters will be hoping that the scandal acts as a catalyst for sweeping domestic reforms to rein in the political influence of the chaebol, South Korea's family-run conglomerates. The acting head of Samsung is already on trial in connection with donations the firm made to Choi's foundations, but there are mounting calls for other tycoons to face legal action.

And across the region?

Friday's ruling comes at a time of increasing tension on the Korean peninsula and in the wider Asia-Pacific region. Park took a hard line against North Korea's nuclear programme, in contrast to some of her predecessors.

There is mounting anxiety over North Korea's progress towards a viable nuclear arsenal. This week, North Korea fired four ballistic missiles, one of which splashed down just 200km from the north-west coast of Japan. Despite hurling insults at Park during the early days of her presidency, the regime in Pyongyang has largely remained silent over the cronyism scandal.

Park succeeded in forging closer ties with China, but relations soured after South Korea agreed to deploy a US missile defence system intended to counter the growing threat from the North. Beijing says the Thaad system represents a threat to its own security and has called for it to be cancelled.

The veteran liberal politician Moon Jae-in is potentially the greatest beneficiary. Moon, who has a comfortable lead in the race to succeed Park, has called for the missile defence system to be "reconsidered", and would be expected to seek dialogue with Pyongyang.

A Moon presidency could come too late to repair relations with Beijing: officials in Washington and Seoul say Thaad could be up and running as early as next month.

Whoever wins the election, the priority will be to bring a semblance of stability to South Korean politics and begin the difficult task of uniting a country that has become bitterly divided by the scandal.

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* The Guardian. Friday 10 March 2017 05.08 GMT Last modified on Friday 10 March 2017 05.11 GMT:

<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/mar/10/park-geun-hye-impeachment-what-next-for-south-korea>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/09/south-korea-impeachment-vote-the-key-facts-behind-a-presidential-crisis>

[2] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/07/how-do-you-solve-a-problem-like-north-korea>

[3] http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-03/10/c_136118433.htm

[4] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/dec/19/park-geun-hye-south-korea-election>