

Asian Currents

Korea

Post-Park impeachment sets up left-winning presidential election

BY HYUNG-A KIM



Candidates for South Korea's presidential elections next month promise radical reform following the fall of President Park Geun-hye, writes Hyung-A Kim

The formal indictment of recently impeached and ousted former president Park Geun-hye on 18 charges on 17 April 2017, including that of receiving or demanding 59.2 billion won (A\$52.1 million) in bribes, has indisputable political implications for South Korean democracy.

In the context of the broader debate in South Korea over governance and constitutional reform, the upcoming presidential election on 9 May, in particular, will represent a test and example of the country's development as a democracy.

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the 1987 democratic constitution, which exhibits obvious flaws. For example, five of the past six presidents, including Park, have fallen from grace, mainly over corruption charges, since South Korea democratised in 1987.

Besides Park's ousting for corruption, two former presidents, Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo, were imprisoned for mutiny and bribery; two presidents, Kim Young-sam and Kim Dae-jung, saw their sons imprisoned for receiving bribes and influence-peddling; one president, Roh Moo-hyun, suicided amid a corruption investigation involving his wife and children.

Yet South Korea is generally regarded as one of the most active democracies in Asia, and the successful impeachment of Park is seen to have shown the potential to become a 'historic milestone in the development of modern democracy across Asia'.

This accolade fully echoes the popular slogan of 'clean-up old evils' among South Korea's presidential candidates, especially of Moon Jae-in, presidential front-runner of the left-wing Democratic Party of Korea. His presidential campaign slogan, 'clean-up old evils' means 'change of the unfair governance system into a fair system', which essentially represents his election platform aimed at countering the pro-Park conservative forces that culminated in Park's abuse of executive powers.

Moon publicly claimed that 'this presidential election is the one that will complete the Candlelight Revolution'—a reference to the anti-Park candlelight protests by millions of citizens, led by 1,550 civic organisations and groups.

In contrast, Ahn Cheol-soo, co-founder of the center-left People's Party, who ranks second in various recent polls, vows to form an alliance government and 'a unified cabinet', if he wins, by selecting the most talented people even from parties other than his own such as from the main conservative Liberty Party Korea (LPK) and the newly created rival conservative Bareun Party (BP).

In this sense, the immediate political implication of the post-Park impeachment and indictment is that it has set the overriding context for the early 9 May

presidential election, where two left-wing candidates, Moon and Ahn, dominate public approval, without any real threat from other presidential candidates, especially from candidates of the conservative LPK and the BP.

With Park's impeachment, the normally united conservatives were divided for the first time in Korea's short democratic history and several right-wing presidential candidates struggle with support ratings below 10 per cent in the survey released by Realmeter. With the same survey showing 43.8 and 31.3 per cent approval ratings for Moon and Ahn respectively, the election is firmly set up for a race between two left-wing candidates—the biggest beneficiaries of Park's impeachment—with Moon's lead widening beyond the margin of error.

Expected reform

However, one needs to be cautious about the likely mid- to long-term political implications of Park's impeachment and indictment, especially regarding governance and constitutional reform in the context of the broader political debate in South Korea.

One of the main reasons for this caution is that former presidents, including Roh Moo-hyun, Lee Myung-bak, and Park Geun-hye, as recently as last October, either promised constitutional reform during their presidential election campaigns or actually proposed various reform options such as a four-year, two-term presidency, a semi-presidential system, or a cabinet system to replace the current five-year, single-term presidency, which dates back to the ninth amendment of the constitution in 1987. But none of these leaders took any action.

Another and more practical reason for caution is that any constitutional change needs the support of two-thirds of the National Assembly plus a public referendum. Considering the current national division between pro- and anti-Park blocs, even within the conservative bloc, and the chaotic and interparty conflicts among both conservatives and progressives, these requirements will be a real test for the new government, whoever wins, to build enough national coherence to deliver the long-debated constitutional and governance reform.

One good sign is that the presidential candidates of the five main parties have all publicly vowed to put a constitutional amendment bill to a public referendum in next year's provincial elections expected to be held in May 2018.

Concerning the power structure of the presidency, Moon promotes a four-year, two-term presidency, whereas conservative frontrunner Hong Joon-pyo of the LPK prefers a decentralised cabinet system with a four-year, two-term presidency. Ahn of the center-left People's Party, however, opposes the cabinet system, arguing that it would be premature, even though he has put weight on a semi-presidential system with reduced presidential powers.

Action on chaebols

Similar to their echo-like pledge to carry out constitutional reform, these candidates have also vowed to shake up corporate governance as their top priority, even though their approach to corporate reform varies. Moon, Ahn, and Yoo Seong-min of the rival conservative BP, for example, have vowed 'radical reform' by banning presidential pardons of the powerful chief executives of chaebols, family-owned Korean conglomerates.

Two other candidates, Hong of the conservative LPK and Sim Sang-jung of the minor progressive Justice Party, in stark contrast, have promised either chaebol-friendly policy (Hong) or dismantling the chaebol system itself (Sim).

Given the fact that Korean voters' insatiable appetite for change exploded in 'candlelight sentiments', especially against the bribery of government by chaebols—including by Samsung vice-chairman Lee Jae-yong, who has been indicted for allegedly providing or promising \$A38 million to Choi Soon-sil, Park Guen-hye's long-time confidante—the echoing vows of these candidates for governance and constitutional reform might bring genuine change to Korea's political and economic structure under a new post-Park impeachment government.

One of the biggest obstacles for expected reform, especially for Moon, if he wins, would be the widespread anti-Moon sentiments among conservative-leaning senior voters, particularly in the southeastern region of Youngnam, the home base

of six former presidents, including Park, and the relatively unbiased Chungcheong region.

For them, Moon is unfit to lead South Korea because he is weak on security issues, especially North Korean threats, as he is accused by his critics as being pro-North or even a North Korean sympathiser.

Featured image

The five presidential candidates from the left are: Moon Jae-in (DPK), Hong Joon-pyo (LPK), Ahn Chol-soo (PK), Yoo Seong-min (BP) and Sim Sang-jung (JP).

About Hyung-A Kim

Hyung-A Kim is Associate Professor of Korean Politics and History at The Australian National University.

Published: 27th April, 2017