

The Impeachment of South Korea's President

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On December 9, South Korea's National Assembly impeached President Park Geun-hye on [charges](#) of "extensive and serious violations of the Constitution and the law" stemming from a corruption scandal that, since late October, have brought millions of South Koreans to the streets in weekly anti-Park protests, the largest in the country's history. The impeachment leaves the South Korean government under a caretaker government—albeit one appointed by Park—while she awaits a decision from the country's Constitutional Court. The impeachment could complicate a number of U.S. foreign policy efforts in Northeast Asia, particularly Congress' recent efforts to apply greater pressure on North Korea.

The Impeachment Process

South Korea's unicameral Assembly voted in favor of impeaching Park by 234-56, exceeding the constitutionally required two-thirds majority needed in the 300-seat chamber. The vote, which included dozens of members of Park's party, suspends her powers while South Korea's Constitutional Court adjudicates the case. The nine-member Court has up to 180 days to reach a verdict. If it finds Park guilty, she is removed from office and elections must be scheduled within 60 days. If the Court finds Park not guilty, she immediately returns to office. Legally, she then could serve out the remainder of her term, which is scheduled to end in February 2018, but she would likely face protests demanding her resignation. If she resigns, an election must be held within 60 days. In either case, her successor would serve a full five-year term. While the Court is deliberating, South Korea's Prime Minister (Hwang Kyo-ahn), who was appointed by the president, serves as acting president.

The Scandal

The scandal that led to Park's impeachment centers on her relationship with a longtime friend, Ms. Choi Soon-sil. South Korean prosecutors have [accused](#) Park of conspiring with Choi and two of Park's former top aides—including her former chief of staff—in "criminal activities" such as fraud and extortion. Among the specific charges are allegations that Park had her staff request that some of South Korea's leading business conglomerates make donations to or sign business contracts—collectively worth tens of millions of dollars—with nonprofits and companies tied to Choi, who allegedly received kickbacks. The National Assembly held hearings featuring the heads of several major conglomerates, who [testified](#) that they received the requests from Park and/or her aides. Prosecutors, who are continuing to pursue the case while the Constitutional Court deliberates, also have charged Park with directing her staff to provide scores of government documents, including some that were classified, to Choi. While in office, Park is immune from criminal

prosecution.

Park has admitted asking Choi for advice on speeches and has [apologized](#) for "[negligence and irresponsibility](#)" in dealing with her "longtime friend" Choi. Her lawyer has dismissed the other charges as "[built on sand](#)."

Apart from the legal charges, Park is widely reported to have relied heavily on Choi for advice and support on many decisions and to have retaliated against government officials and media outlets that suspected Choi's influence. As a result, many Koreans are [questioning](#) whether Choi was involved in various government decisions, including those dealing with North Korea policy.

The public has been particularly outraged by media reports that the Park government intervened to help Choi and Choi's daughter, for instance by allegedly forcing the resignations of national sports officials after the daughter received low scores in an equestrian competition. In a sign of how widely the scandal cuts across South Korean institutions, prosecutors are not confining their investigation to Park and her staff, but also are looking into [charges](#) that Samsung Electronics attempted to influence the Park government by taking actions like funding equestrian training for Choi's daughter.

Implications for the United States

Park's impeachment likely will constrain a key U.S. treaty ally at a time of rising uncertainty in Northeast Asia. It also provides political momentum to South Korea's opposition parties, which traditionally have been more critical of U.S. initiatives, particularly attempts to escalate pressure on North Korea. On the eve of Park's impeachment, her approval ratings fell to the low single digits. Meanwhile, the leading opposition group, the left-of-center Minjoo (Democratic) Party, led in opinion polls, with [approval ratings of over 35%](#), more than double Park's conservative Saenuri Party.

Since 2009, under Park and her predecessor, who also was from the Saenuri Party, U.S.-South Korea relations have grown increasingly close, particularly on North Korea policy. (See CRS Report R41481, [U.S.-South Korea Relations](#).) Since North Korea's fourth nuclear test in January 2016, Park has strongly pushed a policy of expanding global pressure on North Korea that has matched the Obama Administration and Congress' drive to deprive Pyongyang of funds through measures such as expanded sanctions. (See CRS Report R41438, [North Korea: Legislative Basis for U.S. Economic Sanctions](#).)

In response to North Korea's January test, Park shut down the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC), an industrial park located in North Korea where over 100 South Korean manufacturers employed over 50,000 North Korean workers. She also announced that South Korea would agree to a U.S. request to deploy the Theater High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) ballistic missile defense system in South Korea. Additionally, Park since 2015 has sought to improve relations with Japan, furthering a U.S. goal of boosting U.S.-South Korea-Japan ties. In November 2016, Park's government signed an intelligence-sharing agreement (called a General Security of Military Information Agreement, or GSOMIA) with Japan that was encouraged by the United States.

These moves have been criticized by many in South Korea's opposition parties. In December 2016, for example, the man widely viewed as the Minjoo Party's leading presidential candidate, [Moon Jae-In](#), reportedly said that dialogue with North Korea was more useful than pressure in convincing Pyongyang to denuclearize, that the KIC should be reopened, and that the installation of THAAD should be delayed until the next government can consult with China, which has opposed the deployment. The Minjoo Party also has opposed the signing of the GSOMIA and other recent agreements with Japan. Moon narrowly lost to Park in South Korea's 2012 presidential election.