

Korea's de facto anarchy

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December 19, 2016

One of the world's leading industrial powers and America's most important allies no longer has a president in anything but name. And it will be months before a new, effective chief executive is in place in the Republic of Korea.

Today's imbroglio includes alleged undue private influence on the government and political shakedown of corporate chaebols, usual staples of past South Korean scandals. But added are the roles of an old family friend, a discarded tablet computer containing files of presidential documents, and a peculiarly Eastern element of a Shaman and old world spirituality.

President Park Geun-hye's narrow election victory in 2012 seemed to cement conservative control of the national government and led to a steadily tougher policy toward North Korea. Most notable was her closure of the Kaesong industrial park, cutting off nearly \$100 million annually in hard currency for Pyongyang.

While her original popularity fade was typical for the South's succession of democratically elected presidents, the ongoing scandal reduced her approval rating to four percent. Mass demonstrations demanded her ouster. Members of her own party joined the overwhelming legislative majority in voting to impeach her.

She now is suspended. The acting president is Prime Minister Hwang Kyo-ahn, who she had planned to replace, but whose successor had not been approved by the National Assembly.

The Constitutional Court must approve her ouster and could take months, four to six, most observers predict, to rule. If she is forced from office, a special election will have to be organized, even though the normal poll is scheduled for December.

However, her removal is by no means certain. Two-thirds of the nine judges must agree, and most of them were appointed by her Saenuri party. If the court fails to affirm her ouster, she will limp on as president until December, vilified by the public, afflicted by continuing demonstrations, and abandoned by her own party.

Whatever the Constitutional Court's decision, Park is political and legal road kill, facing prosecution the moment her presidential immunity expires. Already everyone is looking ahead to her successor. Acting President Hwang will have little authority — and none after the next election, whenever it is held.

Moon Jae-in leads the opposition party, lost narrowly to Park in 2012, and heads opinion surveys. He would seem to have the inside track to the presidency, but Seoul Mayor Park Won-soon has gained attention promoting left-wing causes and attacking Park. Another leftish activist on the rise is Seongnam Mayor Lee Jae-Myeong, who calls himself the ROK's Bernie Sanders. Park's collapse leaves the opposition well-positioned to take control.

However, United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon is likely to seek South Korea's presidency after his term expires at the end of December, as either the ruling party or an independent candidate. Ahn Cheol-soo heads a smaller party. He was a left-leaning contender in 2012 but ended up backing Moon.

Washington officials are less concerned about domestic ROK sensibilities and more worried about policy toward both North Korea and America. Hwang likely will be on auto-pilot, with little impact. Ahn has focused on domestic issues, while Ban's views are not clear, though he is presumed to lean in a more rightward direction.

Moon formally backs the South Korean alliance with America, but he has called for "balanced diplomacy" with the U.S. and China; many opposition activists oppose deployment of the anti-missile THAAD system. Moon also complained that sanctions won't end North Korea's nuclear program. The other potential opposition candidates are thought to generally share this perspective.

In practice, even when strongly critical of the U.S. South Korean leaders tend to reaffirm the trans-pacific military tie. After all, most South Koreans prefer to save money by having Americans pay for their defense.

If development of future policy must necessarily remain in abeyance, maintenance of the peace will remain first priority. The fact that the U.S., in the midst of its own power transition, must worry about the ROK's security is a reminder of the cost of antiquated, even "obsolete," to use the president-elect's term, alliances. Washington remains entangled and at risk.

Park's future matters only to her, but her successor matters to her countrymen — and, ultimately, to Americans. Incoming President Donald Trump should reconsider an alliance which makes the U.S. hostage to a shaman's ministrations in Seoul.

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