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## Constitutional Court removes South Korean president Park from office

By Ben McGrath

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South Korea's Constitutional Court removed President Park Geun-hye from office in a unanimous 8 to 0 decision late Friday morning. The National Assembly had impeached her on December 9 on thirteen charges, including bribery allegations and dereliction of duty. A new presidential election will likely be held in early May, with Prime Minister and acting president Hwang Gyo-an continuing to serve as the country's leader until then.

Led by acting-Chief Justice Lee Jeong-mi, the court implicated Park in the scandal involving Choi Soon-sil, Park's close confidante, who set up nonprofit organizations to demand bribes from South Korea's powerful *chaebol* conglomerates. The court further charged that Park had violated the law, by leaking state secrets and allowing Choi to take part in government affairs despite holding no formal office. However, it rejected the other charges including neglect of duty in regards to the Sewol ferry sinking in 2014 and violation of freedom of the press.

“Judging from the series of words and actions [Park has made], there is no will to defend the Constitution,” Lee said, in giving her ruling. “The president's violations of the Constitution and the law amount to a betrayal of the people's trust and are grave actions that cannot be tolerated from the perspective of defending the Constitution.”

South Korea's political parties, including Park's ruling Liberty Korea Party (formerly Saenuri), all accepted the court decision. “The Liberty Korea Party gave birth to the Park Geun-hye

government. It was a ruling party and the partner of state affairs,” said party leader In Myeong-jin. “But we failed to fulfill our duty as the ruling party, and failed to protect the dignity and pride of South Korea, which has been built by the people.”

The Trump government in Washington said that it “look(s) forward to a productive relationship with whomever the people of South Korea elect to be their next president.” Since the scandal broke in September, neither Obama nor Trump offered Park any public support.

However, Park is reportedly not resigning herself to the decision. One of her aides told Yonhap News Agency that her office is “in talks over the future course of action.” Seo Seok-ku, a lawyer for Park, questioned the legitimacy of the ruling, saying: “Our suspicions about the court’s secret communications with the parliament turned out to be correct. I don’t think the trial was purely based on law and conscience.”

For millions of people who had taken part in demonstrations around the country since October demanding Park’s removal, the court ruling was a cause for celebration. These protests reflected the enormous anger that masses of South Koreans feel not only against the president’s personal conduct and relations to the *chaebol*, but very broadly against a discredited economic and political system.

While the Korean peninsula faces the imminent danger of a war launched by Washington and Seoul against North Korea and China, South Korean workers’ conditions continue to deteriorate. They face mass job cuts in the shipping and shipbuilding industries, high unemployment for students and recent university graduates, and an overall drive by the government and big business to slash wages and job protections.

While popular relief at Park’s removal is understandable, the removal of Park by itself will address none of the aspirations of the population that ultimately forced her ouster. Power is set to be handed towards other political forces—particularly the Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) and its presumptive presidential candidate, Moon Jae-in—that are tools of the same reactionary ruling class.

Moon has at times attempted to adapt to anti-war and anti-*chaebol* sentiment in the population, notably by proposing to delay the installation of US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile bases aimed at China, North Korea, and Russia. However, he does not call for a suspension of the THAAD program, with which the Trump administration is driving military tensions in the region rapidly in the direction of a direct military clash.

Moon and the DPK still fundamentally support the US alliance. Moon expressed support in a recently published book, for example, for the deployment of a THAAD battery to South Korea, saying, “As the agreement has already been reached between the allies, it is very complicated to discuss the issue again.”

The DPK also regularly whips up anti-Japanese chauvinism to divide workers and block the development of a united struggle against war among workers of the entire region, and it has a long record of backing US imperialism’s predatory wars in the Middle East. The Democratic

governments of both Kim Dae-jung and Noh Moo-hyun backed Washington's wars against Afghanistan and Iraq. Moon served as chief of staff in Noh's government.

Moon currently leads other presidential contenders in polls, with 34 percent support compared to 15 percent for the next closest rival, An Hui-jeong, also of the DPK. Acting president Hwang Gyo-an of the Liberty Korea Party is polling at 8 percent, Ahn Cheol-soo of the People's Party at 9 percent, and Yu Seung-min of the Bareun Party at 1 percent.

The fall of Park illustrates how ferocious international political and geo-strategic tensions are destabilizing bourgeois politics. As she came to office in 2013, Park's overtures to Beijing cut across the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia." While all the South Korean political parties supported the US alliance, they argued over how to balance between their political and military relations with the United States and their economic relations with China.

While in office, Park attacked opponents' democratic rights, including by dissolving the Unified Progressive Party, a minor party allied with the Democrats, in 2014. The move was an attempt to head off growing discontent in the population with her overall agenda, which included stoking tensions with North Korea and trying to force through so-called labor reform, further casualizing the workforce, in response to demands from big business.

She proved unable to achieve this goal and a split developed within her own party, leading one faction to support Park's removal and create the right-wing Bareun (Righteous) Party in January. Leaders in the new formation, including Yu Seung-min, chastised Park's administration in the past for not making Seoul's orientation to Washington stronger.

None of these reactionary forces have anything to offer to working people. Characterizations of Park's government as simply incompetent and corrupt are being used by her opponents and critics to cover up the fact that they have no answer to declining living conditions and the threat of war in the region. The next government, regardless of party, will be just as crisis-ridden and fundamentally in conflict with the demands and aspirations of the working class as the last.