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<http://www.atimes.com/article/south-korea-parliament-votes-impeach-president-park/>

South Korean parliament impeaches President Park

The Constitutional Court must now decide whether to uphold the motion, a process that could take up to 180 days

DECEMBER 9, 2016

South Korean lawmakers on Friday voted to impeach President Park Geun-hye over an influence peddling scandal, setting the stage for her to become the country's first elected leader to be pushed out of office in disgrace.

Parliament voted 234-56 in favor of impeachment with opposition legislators being supported by members of Park's conservative Saenuri Party. However, the Constitutional Court must now decide whether to uphold the motion, a process that could take up to 180 days.

There have been mass rallies every Saturday for the past six weeks calling for Park to quit, and opinion polls show overwhelming public support for her to go.

Parliament was closed to the public on Friday on orders of the speaker, and hours ahead of the scheduled vote, anti-Park activists scuffled with police as they tried to drive two tractors up to the main gate, where more than a 1,000 protesters were gathered.

Police subsequently shut down traffic on a 10-lane highway in front of the parliament's grounds and blockaded a bridge leading to the area.

Protesters gather as police surround them during a rally urging the impeachment of South Korea's President Park Geun-Hye outside the National Assembly in Seoul on December 9, 2016.
Photo: AFP/Yonhap

Park, 64, is accused of colluding with a friend and a former aide, both of whom have been indicted by prosecutors, to pressure big businesses to donate to two foundations set up to back her policy initiatives.

She has denied wrongdoing but apologized for carelessness in her ties with her friend, Choi Soon-sil.

Park, who is serving a single five-year term that was set to end in February 2018, said this week she would await the court's ruling, signalling that political crisis could drag on.

The daughter of a military ruler who led the country for 18 years before being assassinated by his disgruntled spy chief in 1979, Park is under intense pressure to step down immediately.

If she leaves office she would lose presidential immunity, and could be prosecuted for abuse of power and bribery, among other charges.

A poll released on Friday showed her approval rating stood at 5%, a slight improvement from a record low 4%.

The Constitutional Court will now determine whether parliament followed due process and whether there are sufficient grounds for impeachment, a process that will involve arguments from the two sides in public hearings.

The leaders of the two main opposition parties had said their 159 members would all resign if the impeachment motion failed, taking responsibility for their inability to follow through on the demands of the public.

Sole precedent

Prime Minister Hwang Kyo-ahn, who holds what is largely a ceremonial role, will assume interim presidential powers while the court deliberates.

Hwang will take the helm at a time of heightened tension with North Korea.

South Korea's economic outlook is worsening too, in part due to the internal political uncertainty, as well as worries about the potential impact of US President-elect Donald Trump's policies on trade and foreign affairs.

The 9-member Constitutional Court is considered conservative in its makeup but some of its former judges have said the case against Park is strong and was likely to be approved.

In 2004, parliament impeached then-president Roh Moo-hyun, suspending his powers for 63 days while the court reviewed the decision, which it overturned.