Out of the Shadows
The Collapse of Park Geun-hye and the Future of South Korea
By Ho-Ki Kim

The massive influence-peddling scandal that swamped South Korean politics and destroyed President Park Geun-hye’s administration in the last months of 2016 disgusted average Koreans and led to an unprecedented outpouring of people into the streets for peaceful candlelight rallies.

The scandal’s origins, writes Ho-Ki Kim, lie in the authoritarian past and the eventual outcome may cause the country to enter a new era of genuine reform.

IN THE AUTUMN and winter of 2016, a political scandal like no other rocked South Korea. President Park Geun-hye and her administration were thrown into political crisis after Soon-sil Choi, a long-time personal friend of the president, was discovered to have been deeply involved in government policies.

This inconceivable scandal involving Choi and her close beneficiary, Eun-taek Cha, led to public outrage that found an outlet in candlelight rallies demanding Park’s immediate resignation. The crisis came to a head with the National Assembly’s impeachment of Park on Dec. 9. While the Constitutional Court judgment on the impeachment remained to be heard as this article went to press, it is fair to say that the Park administration has prematurely finished its five-year term.1

This essay notes how the crisis began and rapidly evolved from the end of October, and considers its political and social characteristics and meaning for Korean society. I summarize events, examine the political and social implications of the crisis, then analyze the candlelight rallies as a response from civil society. I conclude with a projection of South Korean society after Park.

THE UNFOLDING
What quickly became known as “Choi Soon-sil Gate” was first reported by TV Chosun and the Hankyoreh Shinmun newspaper. In July, TV Chosun reported that Jong-beom Ahn, the Presidential Chief Secretary for Policy Co-ordination, had intervened in fund-raising for the founding of the Mir Foundation. In September, Hankyoreh Shinmun reported the involvement of Park’s...
The structural feature of the scandal is the amalgamation of shadows from the industrialization period and the democratization period. Obviously, this does not absolve President Park of responsibility, but the shadows of her father and the 1987 regime have always existed in the democratic era that began in 1987. It seems as if President Park had neither the willpower nor the capacity to avoid these shadows.

glomerates to donate large amounts of money to the Mir and K-Sports foundations. This is predatory action by the state.

Fourth, from an educational standpoint, the scandal even trampled on the university admissions process, one of Korean society’s most important symbols of fairness. The preferential admission of Yoo-ra Chung to Ewha Womans University caused outrage. Young people and their parents, who must endure a highly competitive university admission process, felt especially aggrieved. The university entrance exam is considered a bastion of fairness in Korean society, and the improper admission was a major trigger for anger that united generations, classes and ideologies.

Fifth, from a cultural perspective, there was the “surreal scandal” aspect of the crisis, which induced a sort of culture shock over the shamanistic behavior of Tae-min Choi, the longtime mentor to President Park. Many citizens suffered from what seemed to be psychological disorientation and shock, as if they had been thrown back to an earlier primitive age. Worse, with the release of news coverage regarding a key figure in the scandal being a former employee of a “host bar” that caters to women and other lurid details — such as questions of plastic surgery over President Park and the purchase of viagra by the Blue House — many South Koreans found the scandal to be barely conceivable.

News of the diverse, mushrooming scandal appalled the public. This was something that just could not happen in South Korea, a country whose exemplary industrialization and democratization at the end of the 20th century are sources of national pride. The astonishment morphed into anger toward Park, Choi and Choi’s family and was expressed through candlelight rallies and demands for the president’s resignation.

ROOTS OF SCANDAL

But what about causes of this surreal scandal? How was it possible? The primary responsibility lies with President Park Geun-hye herself. She did not differentiate between public space and private space when exercising her power. Her governing style remained stuck in the “Fushin

long-time confidant Soon-sil Choi in the founding and management of the K-Sports Foundation. Choi’s past drew increasing interest from political observers and civil society through the coverage by TV Chosun and Hankoreh Shinmun.

The decisive factor in publicizing the scandal was coverage by the JTBC cable network on Oct. 24 saying that official documents related to the Blue House were on a tablet computer belonging to Choi — and that 44 files were drafts of presidential speeches and official statements. This began the furor over suspicions that Choi had been editing Park’s speeches; she was also allegedly in possession of leaked cabinet meeting documents, official papers regarding personnel decisions process, one of Korean society’s most important symbols of fairness. The preferential admission of Yoo-ra Chung to Ewha Womans University caused outrage. Young people and their parents, who must endure a highly competitive university admission process, felt especially aggrieved. The university entrance exam is considered a bastion of fairness in Korean society, and the improper admission was a major trigger for anger that united generations, classes and ideologies.

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dictatorship" era of the 1970s, when her father abused his power. The ruling Saenuri Party also is not exempt from blame. It is hard to estimate how much party leaders knew about Park's private life, but it seems that they were aware of Choi's influence to some extent. At the very least was recorded as the largest rally in South Korea's history. On October 24 there were large-scale candlelight rallies each Saturday in Seoul, Busan, Kwangju and other cities to demand Park's immediate resignation. Of course, the socio-economic inequality of the Park Chung Hee regime failed to stop the development of North Korean nuclear weapons and led to the closing of the Kaesong Industrial Complex, a symbol of inter-Korean reconciliation. As a matter of fact, the Park administration is the worst of the democratization era that began in 1987. Immediately after it took office in 2013, there were critical incidents such as suspicions that the National Intelligence Service had intervened in the presidential election of December 2012, the Sewol ferry disaster in 2014, and the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) outbreak in 2015. These all revealed inability and irresponsibility by the Park administration, and at the center of those storms was the president's leadership. Park adhered to an authoritarian style, failed to keep her private and public life separate and lacked problem-solving capability. She relied instead on public nostalgia for the presidency of Park Chung Hee and fear of repressive state organizations such as the National Intelligence Service.

Some may see policies such as reform of the civil service pension program as an achievement of the Park administration. However, when juxtaposed with the negatives of her administration, there is little to praise. Promises of "economic democratization" and "customized welfare," both parts of her presidential campaign, were immediately discarded when she came to power. Her policies on the Korean Peninsula failed to stop the development of North Korean nuclear weapons and civilian life, many people who participated in the rallies demanded revolutionary change — a structural reform of South Korean society. The true nature of the rallies will be defined after a new government emerges following the impeachment.

**CANDLELIGHT RALLIES AS A SOCIAL MOVEMENT**

As mentioned above, candlelight rallies were the primary public reaction to the scandals. From October 24 there were large-scale candlelight rallies each Saturday in Seoul, Busan, Kwangju and other cities to demand Park's immediate resignation. Week by week, the number of participants increased dramatically. At the December 3 candlelight rally after the President's third public announcement on November 29, more than two million citizens participated nationwide, and it was recorded as the largest rally in South Korea's modern history.

Candlelight rallies as a political vehicle in South Korea originate from protests about two middle-school girls who were killed by a US military vehicle in 2002. Since that time, large-scale candlelight rallies have become a typical characteristic of demonstrations in South Korea; they were mounted, in one notable example, to oppose the decision to import US beef by the Lee Myung-bak administration in 2008. Candles symbolize light in the darkness, and, unlike past militant methods, peaceful candlelight rallies draw large numbers of citizens to participate in protests held with a festive air.

How do we assess the rallies that occurred in response to Choi Soon-sil Gate? I have identified five characteristics of the candlelight rallies as a social movement. First, they are a citizen-led social movement, drawing ordinary citizens regardless of age, regional origin or ideology, while typical actors such as labor unions and NGOs were secondary agents. Second, the candlelight rallies were closer to a "cultural festival" rather than traditional protests, as can be seen from the concerts and performances that accompanied the rallies. Third, in terms of strategy, social media was the main means of communication in the candlelight rallies, with people sharing videos and opinions. Fourth, in terms of goals, the rallies demanded the resignation of President Park and the old system. In other words, they were a social movement demanding the end of Korea's ancien régime and of collusion between government officials and powerful businessmen, a negative legacy from the Park Chung Hee regime. Fifth, in terms of historical meaning, the candlelight rallies were a "political-social" movement that succeeded from the 1960 April revolution and the massive June uprisings of 1987. The citizens' desire to throw out an incompetent and irresponsible president and create a new political order has been expressed through these rallies.

Some progressive media have called the movement a "candlelight revolution." But we should wait and see whether "revolution" is an apt label. However, if revolution means the changing of the state foundation, economic system and cultural life, many people who participated in the rallies demanded revolutionary change — a structural reform of South Korean society. The true nature of the rallies will be defined after a new government emerges following the impeachment.

**BROKEN PROMISES**

This essay looks at the scandal up to the National Assembly's vote for impeachment on December 9. While the situation may change depending on the judgment of the Constitutional Court, there is no doubt that the Park administration no longer has any political life expectancy.

In retrospect, the Park administration is the worst of the democratization era that began in 1987. Immediately after it took office in 2013, there were critical incidents such as suspicions that the National Intelligence Service had intervened in the presidential election of December 2012, the Sewol ferry disaster in 2014, and the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) outbreak in 2015. These all revealed inability and irresponsibility by the Park administration, and at the center of those storms was the president's leadership. Park adhered to an authoritarian style, failed to keep her private and public life separate and lacked problem-solving capability. She relied instead on public nostalgia for the presidency of Park Chung Hee and fear of repressive state organizations such as the National Intelligence Service.

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**SOUTH KOREAN SOCIETY AFTER PARK**

Regardless of whether impeachment is accepted or rejected by the Constitutional Court, the presidential election of 2017 will take place. Since it will be held on short notice, it is hard to predict the political process afterward. Among the likely candidates are Democratic Party leader Jae-In Moon, outgoing UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, Seongnam City Mayor Jae-Myung Lee, People's Party leader Cheol-Soo Ahn and Saenuri Party leader Seong-Min Yoo.

Attention is also being directed at a possible reorganization of political parties. In particular, the Saenuri Party remains a center of attention, and it is inevitable that some change will be seen in the party, which has lost its political legitimacy. This will occasion other changes in political parties and their order of importance in South Korea.

After the impeachment of President Park, South Korean politics must recover and help rebuild Korean society. The demands of millions of citizens gathered in candlelight rallies included not only impeachment but also structural reform of society due to issues such as low growth, inequality, an aging society and the challenge of the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution. Inequality in particular is seen as the most critical issue by the majority. And in order to eliminate inequality, remarkable economic and social reforms will be required.

Will South Korean politics finally open a new era beyond the shadows of the Park Chung Hee regime and the 1987 regime? South Korea is on the brink of massive new challenges.

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