The People Power Revolution that toppled former South Korean President Park Geun-hye was historic and unprecedented. Among other things, it represented a visceral call by the public for clean government and an accountable democracy. The tasks now facing newly elected President Moon Jae-in are daunting and urgent.

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Popular Reset: South Korean Democracy in the Post-Park Era

By Yoonkyung Lee

The massive outpouring of protest that ultimately unseated one president and helped elect another in South Korea is part of a long tradition of popular protest in the country. In order for the new center-left government of President Moon Jae-in to succeed, writes Yoonkyung Lee, it must understand how the conservatives came undone and take steps to institutionalize the democratic spirit of the candlelight vigils that brought it to power.

THERE ARE turning points in history that redefine the political landscape. Scholars call these critical junctures.1 For South Korean democracy, the year 2017 is one such juncture, and what follows almost certainly will diverge from the past. Although both domestic and international challenges abound for the new Moon Jae-in administration, the dramatic people power that paved the way for the new government will undergird South Korean democracy in the future and mark a departure from previous politics. This short essay examines the political magnitude of the candlelight protests that culminated in the ouster of one president and the election of a new one in May 2017 and discusses the different path South Korean democracy will follow in the post-Park era.

Millions of ordinary citizens holding aloft candles, a new symbol of peaceful disobedience and resistance in South Korea, demonstrated in central plazas in major cities — under the umbrella name of Gwanghwamun Square, the gathering point in the center of Seoul — to force a dramatic change in government in 2017. Infuriated by the disclosure of unprecedented political irregularities committed by then president Park Geun-hye and her confidante, Choi Soon-sil, public outrage began in October 2016. The president whom voters had chosen four years earlier had relegated her constitutional duties to a longstanding friend who then used the power to secure personal gains, bypassing formal institutions and thwarting the rule of law. Candlelight rallies were held every Saturday in Gwanghwamun Square, across the nation and even among Korean communities worldwide. The uprising persisted for almost six months, drawing a cumulative 17 million participants. The exceptional scale and unwavering tenacity of the Saturday protests compelled the National Assembly to impeach Park in December 2016, with the Constitutional Court confirming the presidential impeachment in March 2017, thus clearing the way for prosecutors to arrest Park and her cronies on various criminal charges. In the snap election held on May 9, Moon Jae-in of the Democratic Party won the presidency with 41 percent of the vote in a race of five major and eight minor candidates. This was obviously a change made by the people, ending 10 years of conservative rule under Lee Myung-bak andings have been at the heart of South Korea’s moments of democratic transition and deepening. The country’s first president, Rhee Syngman, who conspired to maintain a lifetime presidency, was dethroned by a popular revolt in April 1960. Even the most repressive dictators, Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan, were unable to suffocate public resistance organized by college students, dissident intellectuals and industrial workers. Most crucially, it was a nationwide grassroots mobilization that put an end to decades of authoritarian rule in 1987. Even after the democratic transition, citizens and activists did not disperse leisurely, but

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regime. First of all, candlelight protests created an enlightened, mobilized and empowered citizenry, which will remain a powerful asset for democratic politics in the years to come. Gwanghwamun Square turned into a huge school for democracy education as millions of individuals experienced direct democracy as they expressed various political demands. Citizens of all walks of life and ages gathered and protested, studying the Korean Constitution and articulating vibrant ideas about what democracy should look like. Participants’ demands were not limited to bringing Park and her clique to legal justice but called for a fundamental shift in the status quo of the political system. For Koreans, democracy is attained not only when authoritarian practices — such as government-sponsored history textbooks, the blacklisting of dissidents and muzzling of the press — are terminated, but also when state-business collusion ends, the unbridled power of the chaebol, South Korea’s family-controlled conglomerates, is checked, labor rights are respected and the government is accountable for disasters such as the Sewol Ferry tragedy. Among the demands is also an end to subservient diplomatic relations like the agreement with Japan over the “comfort women” issue and the controversial installation of the US THAAD missile defense system.

Citizen-protesters also came to realize that their collective action can actually change politics by bringing down an incumbent president and installing a new government. The presence of such a politically effective electorate should serve as strong bedrock for South Korean democracy, making it extremely risky for any political force to attempt to bring back the Park regime’s corruption and authoritarianism. These citizens likely will not accept another political misstep that compromises democratic procedures and principles.
CONSERVATIVES IN DISARRAY

Another important implication of the candlelight protests is the direct impact on the reconfiguration of formal political institutions. The growing magnitude of the popular revolt, particularly the protest on Nov. 26, 2016, that brought 1.5 million citizens (3.3 percent of South Korea’s population) onto the streets, pushed both the center-left Democratic Party and Park’s conservative Saenuri Party to depart from their earlier lukewarm reaction to the presidential scandal. Due to popular pressure, the impeachment move was passed with an overwhelming majority of 234 out of 299 lawmakers present (including 68 ayes by Saenuri lawmakers). This led to a domino effect within the conservative camp by creating a party split. Thirty Saenuri lawmakers left the party and formed a new party called the Bareun Party, promising to represent a more reasonable conservative view. Saenuri was compelled to rename itself the Liberal Korea Party, a customary move by Korean political parties when faced with rising disapproval.

The presidential race scheduled for right after Park’s impeachment showed that the unity of the conservative electorate was considerably weakened. The candidates of the two conservative parties received 24 percent and 6.8 percent of the vote, respectively, a significant drop from previous conservative vote tallies in earlier presidential races.\(^4\) In contrast, President Moon received relatively even support from all age groups except those over 60 and from all regions except Daegu and Gyeongbuk, the conservatives’ stronghold. Still, even in these regions, votes for the Liberal Korea Party candidate plummeted to 47 percent compared to more than 80 percent for Park in 2012. This is the first time that authoritarian conservatives have been so disorganized and divided. The reshuffling of the conservative camp is expected to rationalize South Korea’s political right and strengthen programmatic competition among political parties.

Yet another reason why Korean democracy in the post-Park era will follow a different path lies in the political experience that has molded the incoming administration. The new government comes to power as a seasoned, center-left political force with a formidable reform agenda. In fewer than 10 days in office, President Moon delivered a historic speech at the 37th commemoration ceremony of the deadly 1980 Gwangju uprising, emphasizing that his government stands on the sacrifices that Korean people have made to build democracy as well as on the legacies of previous Democratic governments under Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun. The political appointments and administrative decisions that President Moon made during his first few weeks in office seem to remain true to his promise to bring the candlelight movement’s values of fairness, equity, and justice to South Korean politics.

It is noteworthy to recognize that the new administration calls itself a Democratic government. This not only implies an emphasis on party politics instead of a single powerful leader, but also reflects the Democrats’ bitter lessons learned from past failures. The Kim Dae-jung government marked the first transfer of power to the political opposition and succeeded in helping the South Korean economy recover from the devastation of the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis while opening a new era of rapprochement with North Korea. President Roh Moo-hyun strengthened democratic institutions by decentralizing political power as he continued his predecessor’s liberal policies. Yet, the two liberal governments were also tainted by political corruption and criticized for the careless adoption of neoliberal policies that later contributed to economic inequality. Liberal government was thus besieged by political attacks from both right and left.

THE TASK AHEAD

The Democrats’ consecutive defeats to the conservatives in 2007 and 2012 ushered in a decade of democratic reversals. The conservatives reigned by undermining the basic principles of democracy, strengthening the privileges of the political and economic elite, freezing inter-Korea relations and returning to subservient diplomacy vis-à-vis the major powers. The new center-left political force behind the Moon government is built on the experience of failure during the period of liberal rule as well as the devastating backsliding of the conservative decade. Coming to power with such harshly learned political lessons, the reformist government is expected to make significant breakthroughs in restoring the democratic process and institutionalizing socioeconomic reforms.

The fact that the new government is qualified with seasoned political experience and widely endorsed by a re-energized democracy-minded citizenry does not imply that its political path ahead is without critical challenges. Domestic politics aside, there is no question that dealing with North Korea and building viable foreign relations with China, Japan and the US will be challenging. Dismantling the chaebol oligopoly to restore market fairness, creating jobs especially for the young, lessening the labor-market duality between permanent and temporary employment and expanding social protection to address soaring inequality, are all daunting political tasks for the government.

For the Moon administration to have a lasting effect on South Korean democracy, there are two political missions of particular importance. First, political reform needs to emphasize strengthening democratic institutions and the rule of law. Previous conservative governments demonstrated that blindly following a president leads to dire consequences for democracy and governance. The resiliency of democratic politics should go beyond one presidential election and can be attained only by strengthening institutions and procedures such as the independence of the three branches of government, the mechanisms of checks and balances, and programmatic competition among political parties. Institutionalizing the political norm of playing by the rules will further contribute to breaking the collusive nexus between political and economic interests.

Another crucial task for the new government is to invent institutional channels through which the political demands raised in the candlelight protests are funneled into the formal political process. One of the Achilles’ heels of South Korean democracy has been the disconnect between contentious social movements and unrepresentative political institutions. Despite waves of mass protests to expand the horizon of democratic politics, the formal political institutions of the legislature, the political parties and the bureaucracy fell behind in paying attention to popular demands. Citizens mobilized for a political cause will likely stay as a lasting feature of South Korean politics, creating the crucial opportunity to bridge the political energy in the squares with institutional politics. Strengthening participatory democracy both at the national and sub-national levels would prove that democratic politics is different in the post-Park era.

Yoonkyung Lee is associate professor of Sociology, University of Toronto, Canada. She can be reached at yoonkyung.lee@utoronto.ca