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On This Topic

Corruption, Citizen Resistance, and the Future of Democracy in Korea: *An Introduction*

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Introduction

Between October 2016 and May 2017, Korean people witnessed a series of breath-taking political events unprecedented in the history of the country. Following a revelation of the so-called Choi Soon-sil gate in October 2016, the National Assembly impeached President Park Geun-hye. The Constitutional Court confirmed the impeachment, and President Park and her top advisers were arrested and put on trial. Moon Jae-in of the opposition party won the presidential election and was sworn in as president in May, 2017.

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In this introductory piece, I will give historical background leading up to and during the corruption scandal in Korea, lay out some of the research questions social scientist need to address to understand what happened in Korea, and describe how we collectively attempt to explain different aspects of the corruption scandal in this special issue.

Description of the Corruption Scandal and the Following Political Events in Korea

Park Geun-hye was elected the first female president of South Korea in 2012. Park was a daughter of the former president, Park Chung-hee, an authoritarian leader who ruled Korea with iron fists between 1961 and 1979 when he was assassinated by his own Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) director.

Park Geun-hye entered politics in 1998 and was elected to the National Assembly five consecutive times. By 2012, she was the leader of the governing Saenuri party and became the party's presidential candidate. As I mentioned above, she was a daughter of the former president Park Chung-hee. Being a daughter of Park Chung-hee had a mixed effect on her candidacy. First, Park Chung-hee ruled the country by ruthlessly cracking down on dissidents and forced constitutional amendments to stay in power for life by avoiding direct popular election of the president, i.e., the so-called *Yushin* constitution. Many dissidents were tortured, and some were probably killed. Second, to gain legitimacy after the coup in 1961, Park Chung-hee consistently pushed for economic development plans under his reign, which most Korean people believe to have moved Korea from one of the world's poorest countries after the Korean War to its current status as one of the 15 largest economies in the world. The Korean people were thus split in their evaluation of the Park Chung-hee era. His daughter Park Geun-hye's run for the presidency would show this split more clearly. To some, being associated with the nation's most notorious dictator would work like a "semi-scandal" for Park Geun-hye, although she herself had nothing to do with her father's reign (Kim and Roh 2019).

The opposition Democratic United Party (the DUP) nominated Moon Jae-in as its presidential candidate for the 2012 election. Moon was closely associated with the former President Roh Moo-hyun, the last president the slightly left-leaning Democratic party produced. Moon operated a joint law firm with Roh before they entered politics, served as a Blue House (Presidential) chief of staff under Roh, and was the president of the Roh Moo-hyun Foundation until he became a presidential candidate. In an essentially pair-wise contest, Park beat Moon 51.6% to 48% (see Table 1).

Table 1. The Results of the 18th Presidential Election in 2012

Candidate	Party	Total Number of Votes Won	Proportion of Votes Won
Park Geun-hye	Saenuri Party	15,773,128	51.6%
Moon Jae-in	Democratic United Party	14,692,632	48.0%
Others*	Independents	128,861	0.4%

Note: There were four other candidates, none of whom affected the race for all practical purposes.

Park Geun-hye, the daughter, became president after Korea turned into a democracy. She was expected to establish law and order and lead a strong but efficient government. Three years into her presidency, however, a revelation in October 2016 by a TV station called the JTBC about Park's associate, Choi Soon-sil, a civilian without holding any position in government, being involved in decision-making about most sensitive political/national security policy issues shocked the nation. Following media pursuits led to further revelations of Choi's involvement in all sorts of government decision-making including personnel appointment, financial policies such as illegally using government money to aid Lee Jae-yong to get control of the Samsung, sports policies by creating public foundations for promoting particular sports, and cultural policy excluding left-leaning artists from government subsidy, on and on. Curiously as a result of all these policies of which she was involved in making, Choi ended up personally and

financially benefitted enormous amount of wealth. She appeared to have utilized government organs and personnel rather freely. It appeared that the president not only acquiesced but oftentimes actively accommodated Choi's pursuits of wealth and power. We have to conclude that the president unconstitutionally shared her presidential power with an unelected civilian.

Some of the irregularities now collectively known as Choi Soon-sil gate include:

- Bribery: Samsung purchased very expensive horses for Choi Soon-sil's daughter, a mediocre equestrian, for her training in Germany. If Choi did not have influence on national corporate policies, why would Samsung buy horses for this civilian person?
- Bribery/Forced Contribution: Choi Soon-sil and her associates established two public funding foundations, to which several Korean business conglomerates including Samsung, Hyundai, SK, and Lotte contributed tens of millions of dollars each. Interestingly, newly created companies linked to Choi Soon-sil herself monopolized the funding/projects from these public foundations. Now the contributors argue that they were forced to pay money by President Park, while prosecutors think that they got something in return.
- All the presidential speeches were proofread and corrected by Choi Soon-sil.
- Choi was given access to all secure documents, and gave "advice" to the president in all areas of policy-making.
- Blacklisting of left-leaning artists: Headed by the presidential chief of staff, Kim Gi-chun, the Blue House and the Ministry of Culture, Sports, & Tourism made up a list of about 10,000 left-leaning artists and excluded them from government funding. Was it done by the directive of the president?
- College admissions irregularities and faulty grades for Choi Soon-sil's daughter at Ewha Womans University: For this "operation," the university president, high-ranking administrators, and professors were recruited.
- Illegal medical practice: A plastic surgeon without proper security clearance regularly visited Blue House at night hours to perform something. What exactly he did is still controversial.
- And the list goes on.

The public was angered to the point that a large number of (oftentimes more than a million) demonstrators gathered on main city square (called Gwanghwa-mun) near presidential mansion in the capital city of Seoul every Saturday evening for nearly five months. This protest, known as *Chot-bul* in Korean (meaning a candlelight protest), was probably unprecedented in human history in the sense that there was no single instance of violence, although a million citizens gathered in the same square facing a wall of police blocking the passage to the Blue House, the presidential mansion in Korea.

With the cumulative participants reaching seventeen million in a country with the population of fifty million, *Chot-bul* became a symbol of direct democracy. It became obvious what the overwhelming majority of citizens wanted. The Korean National Assembly acted under pressure and impeached President Park by well over two-thirds votes in December, 2016. The Constitutional Court started deliberating the impeachment case, which was the final stage of firing a president in Korea. The special prosecutors appointed by the National Assembly began investigating the wrong-doings of Choi Soon-sil and her associates in and out of government. The Constitutional Court decided to confirm presidential impeachment on March 10, 2017. As a result, Park was fired as president. Prime Minister Hwang Gyo-an stepped in as acting head of government. Subsequently the special prosecutors indicted Park for bribery and failure to uphold constitution. She was arrested and put in jail for 21 different charges. The vice chairman of the Samsung corporation, Lee Jae-yong, was also indicted for bribery. Up until now 42 people, many of whom were top public officials in the Park administration, have been tried for various criminal charges. Park's trial began in May, 2017.[1]

Under the Korean law, a new presidential election must take place within 60 days from the day when the presidency becomes vacant. The new election day was set for May 9. Five parties nominated their own candidates.

1. She was found guilty on 16 accounts and sentenced 24 years in prison in April 2018. This sentence was confirmed (with increased jail term of 25 years) by the appellate court in August 2018. Park's case is currently tried by the supreme court.

Despite their gallant effort to distance themselves from the former President Park (by splitting parties and changing party names), the two conservative parties garnered limited support from the electorate. A slightly left-leaning opposition Democratic party candidate, Moon Jae-in began to pull away from the rest of the pack. As Table 2 shows, Moon Jae-in won the election by plurality.[2]

Table 2. The Results of the 19th Presidential Election in 2017

Candidate	Party	Total Number of Votes Won	Proportion of Votes Won
Moon Jae-in	Democratic Party	13,423,800	41.1%
Hong Jun-pyo	Liberal Korea Party	7,852,849	24%
Ahn Chul-soo	People's Party	6,998,342	21.4%
Yoo Seung-min	Bareun Party	2,208,741	6.8%
Shim Sang-jung	Justice Party	2,017,458	6.2%

The new president Moon's term began right after the election. He inherited a largely divided country and has multiple tasks of wiping out corruption, reviving the economy, and re-establishing government legitimacy. At the same time, the Moon administration must steer the country in a diplomatic mess due to all sorts of strange decisions the previous Park administration made in its last year:

- U.S.A.: Finalizing the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) and renegotiating Free Trade Agreement (FTA), which the Trump administration demanded.
- China: China objected to the deployment of the THAAD and started retaliating by pressuring Korean corporations operating in China and regulating Chinese tourism to Korea, sort of the Chinese version of economic sanction.

2. There is no run off election in Korea.

- Japan: Re-negotiating the comfort-woman agreement, which the Park government signed with Japan. In December 2015, the governments of Japan and South Korea came to an agreement over the issue of Japan's wartime sexual slavery of Korean women—known euphemistically as the "comfort women." Per the agreement, Japan apologized and agreed to contribute 1 billion yen (approximately US$8.3 million at the time) to set up a foundation under the South Korean government to support the living victims. The language of this agreement included that this deal was "a final and irreversible resolution." Although the Park government and that of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe thought the deal sufficient at the time to move past this decades-old dispute, public opinion was another matter. Korean people never accepted this agreement and now demanded the Moon government to re-negotiate it, which Japanese government had refused to do.
- On top of all this, of course, North Korea tested its sixth nuclear device and intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) several times since the new Moon administration took office.
- All these issues put Korea in an awkward position in its relationships with the U.S.A., China, and Japan.

Potential Research Questions Arising from the Scandal

So many questions arise about the so-called Choi Soon-sil gate in Korea. Some of the questions worth academic endeavor include:

- How could this corruption scandal happen in Korea, a country known as one of the model new democracies?[3]
- How do we explain the magnitude and longevity of candlelight marches in 2016 and 2017? What were the individual and aggregate factors that drove Korean citizens to participate in the protest?
- How did the corruption crisis affect the vote choice of the Korean electorate for the new presidential election held in May 2017? Does

3. Explanations for this question may include any of the political, economic, psychological, social, historical, cultural, and institutional origins of corruption in Korea.

election outcome indicate a permanent re-alignment of Korean parties and voters or a phenomenon created by one time shock to the system?
- How can one explain a series of disastrous foreign policy decisions made during the Park administration when regular government institutions were dominated by unofficial group led by Choi Soon-sil?

What We Do in this Special Issue

In this special issue, we try to answer some of the questions above. Each of the manuscripts is an attempt to address one of them. After our collaborative effort, we will have much better understanding of the causes and effects of the corruption scandal that resulted in the presidential impeachment and political chaos in Korea.

In "Articulating Inequality in the Candlelight Protest in 2016–2017," Professor Yoonkyung Lee of the University of Toronto, Canada, probes how the candlelight rallies were able to grow and last to result in such a dramatic regime change in 2016–2017. She argues, while the rigged and dysfunctional administration led by Park was the immediate cause that prompted the massive uprising, a more fundamental critique of Korean society laden by a multitude of socioeconomic inequalities brought citizens to the streets to demand regime change. In other words, this contentious mobilization of ordinary citizens was not just about removing a corrupt and incompetent president but more about broadening the imagination of democratic politics. Few would disagree that Korean economy, which was once praised for "rapid growth with equity" in the postwar decades has now transformed into one with "low growth with high inequality." The immediate cause that gathered people to Gwanghwamun Square was President Park's and her personal friend's abuse of power. But there was a deeper and broader concern that assembled people in the candlelight protest. It was profound rage that the system was rigged to disproportionally advantage the few with economic and political power and that elected officials were incapable of responding to ordinary citizen's grievance over soaring inequality and unfairness in Korean society.

In "Determinants of Unaffiliated Citizen Protests: The Korean Candlelight Protests of 2016–2017," Professor WooJin Kang of Kyungpook National University, Korea examines individual citizen's decision to participate in the candlelight protest by analyzing individual-level data. He shows that personal decision to participate in the protest was much more complicated than one can imagine. Not only personal anger toward the corruption scandal was an important contributing factor, but his/her perception about the socioeconomic inequality, the importance of politics, attitude toward democracy, and political ideology all played a role in his/her decision to participate in protest. Further, there were causal relationships among these explanatory factors as well. Therefore, the author tries to create a map showing causal directions among these factors as well as individual citizen's decision to protest.

In "The Corruption Scandal and Vote Switching in South Korea's 19th Presidential Election," Professor Woo Chang Kang of Australian National University and Doctor Han-Wool Jeong of the Future Consensus Institute, Korea examines how the corruption scandal and impeachment affected voter's decisions in the 19th presidential election in South Korea. Both aggregate and individual-level analyses demonstrate that the primary change was the conversion of supporters of the major parties—particularly conservative from the 18th election. Their analysis demonstrates that the collapse of the main conservative party is likely to be a short-term backlash against the corruption scandal rather than a precursor of a fundamental shift in voter party alignments in South Korea. Regional and generational cleavages are still influential in vote switching by major-party supporters. Aside from their attitudes to the impeachment, those switching from conservative parties generally hold similar issue preferences to those who remain. Therefore, the authors argue that once the political salience of the impeachment issue wanes, it is questionable whether the current split will endure.

In "Privatized Foreign Policy? Explaining the Park Geun-hye Administration's Decision-making Process," Professor Yangmo Ku of Norwich University, U.S.A., tries to explain how policy makers in the Park Geun-hye administration produced a series of abrupt and arbitrary foreign

policy decisions on the issues of comfort women, the Kaesong Industrial Complex, and THAAD deployment. By developing a synthesized model with system–and individual–level variables, he finds that President Park and her aides were confronted with external challenges that encompassed increased Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK) provocations, China's lukewarm responses to those actions, and the U.S.A. pressure to strengthen the U.S.A.-the Republic of Korea (ROK)-Japan security triangle. In responding to these events, the ROK's decision makers made disastrous foreign policy decisions, according to Professor Ku, due to the lack of institutionalized discussions among policy makers, their insensitivity to public opinion, and the influence of a secret advisory group led by Choi Soon-sil on state affairs.

Conclusion

In this special issue, a group of young Korea specialists tries to answer some puzzling issues associated with the Choi Soon-sil gate, which led to the presidential impeachment. How good a job we do in uncovering these puzzles is for the reader to determine.

The democratic opening began in Korea after nationwide citizen demonstrations in 1987. Evaluating democracy in Korea, the country has achieved "procedural democracy." The political leaders are elected in regularly scheduled elections. There has been three regime changes in peaceful means before the presidential impeachment in 2017. People enjoy a certain level of political rights and freedom.

However, Korean politics has been marred by regionalism, polarization, and corruption. Major political parties are based on regions and classes, which means that, if you are nominated in your party's main region, you are assured of re-election even if you did not do anything as an incumbent or you engaged in corruptive behavior. This phenomenon led to a lack of accountability among the political leaders. It also made citizens cynical about politics, as they felt they could not change anything.

Now this will change. *Chot-bul* was a great opportunity for civic

education in Korea. Now people understand what they can do if and when they see injustice, corruption, and political irregularities. Also now leaders are afraid of "people power." They understand that they cannot enjoy the comfort of staying in office doing little and taking a lot. Overall, we are optimistic about the future of democracy in Korea.

REFERENCE

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