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In just over a year, between April 2016 and May 2017, a series of dramatic events roiled the domestic politics of South Korea (hereinafter Korea). Things began normally enough: An election to fill all 300 seats in the unicameral National Assembly went forward as scheduled on 13 April 2016. A presidential balloting was set to follow in due course near the close of 2017 as the incumbent, Park Geun Hye of the right-of-center Saenuri (New Frontier) Party, finished the single five-year term that the constitution allows.

In late October 2016, however, a lightning bolt of scandal electrified the scene. President Park and her confidante, Choi Soon Sil, faced charges of cronyism and other forms of corruption. Massive protests against Park broke out; millions of citizens in this country of 51 million became involved. The demonstrations would go on into the new year. They culminated in the first-ever successful impeachment of a Korean president on 10 March 2017, when the Constitutional Court issued a unanimous 8–0 ruling upholding the Assembly’s December 9 impeachment vote.

Two months after the March ruling, on May 9, a snap presidential election elevated Moon Jae In of the left-of-center Democratic Party to the highest office. This special election featured five major candidates, an exceptionally large presidential field. In 1987, four people had run, and Korea has also seen three-way races (in 1992, 1997, and 2007). All these together can give the impression of a fragmented party system, though in truth the tendency of smaller parties to merge into larger ones soon after an election has maintained what has largely been a two-party
system. Will the present five-party structure move back toward the usual bipartism? That remains to be seen. With only 40 percent of the Assembly under their control, Democratic Party leaders hoped to find a way to merge the People’s Party (a faction that had spun off from the Democrats in early 2016) back into Democratic ranks.

Dispensing with any transition period, newly elected President Moon took the reins of power the day after the balloting. The right side of the political spectrum, having lost because it split over impeachment and other issues, contemplated its loss of power and asked itself how it could chart a course back.

In an established democracy such as Korea, a string of tumultuous events can seem perplexing. Has a country widely known as an exemplary case from the global “third wave” of democratization suddenly fallen under the spell of populist agitation and lapsed into deinstitutionalization? Some observers have said as much. “The wave of populism that fueled Brexit, the rise of Donald Trump and the fall of Italian leader Matteo Renzi has reached South Korea,” proclaimed one Bloomberg News correspondent.2

That is not the best characterization of what happened, however. The events of 2016–17 were not an attack on democratic institutions, but rather a movement to redress their violation by Korea’s political elite. The truth is that protest-led reform has been an integral part of Korea’s political development for decades. In 1960, student-led protests forced authoritarian chief executive Syngman Rhee (the Republic of Korea’s first president) to leave office. In 1987, it was street demonstrations that pressured the dictatorship of President Chun Doo Hwan to accept the reforms that marked Korea’s transition to democracy. Given this history, it makes more sense to view protest-led reform in Korea as a legitimate channel through which democratic political energies can flow.

Nonetheless, this stunning reversal of political fortunes, with an unprecedented impeachment as the turning point, poses a number of questions about Korean politics and where it is headed. What accounts for President Park’s extraordinary fall? What are the main challenges, socioeconomic as well as political, that confront Korean democracy in the wake of these events? Can President Moon’s new government live up to high postimpeachment expectations, especially with a National Assembly in which his Democratic Party controls only two-fifths of the seats? What does it all mean for the future of Korean democracy?

The Road to Impeachment

President Park’s impeachment was unexpected. Pressures from below triggered it. It was the second impeachment of a chief executive in Korean history: President Roh Moo Hyun had been impeached by the National Assembly in 2004, less than a year and a half after his 2002
election, but the Constitutional Court overruled the attempt to oust him from office. The impeachment of Roh, a politician of the center-left, had been the work of parties opposed to him, which at the time enjoyed a large majority in the Assembly. His foes accused him of having violated his presidential duty to maintain electoral neutrality by publicly urging his supporters to vote in the April 2004 election. President Park’s impeachment a dozen years later, by contrast, had clearly come at the instigation not of political elites, but of civil society. Many leaders who at first felt hesitant about impeaching her later backed the move as popular pressure for it escalated.

Park Geun Hye (b. 1952) is the daughter of the late President Park Chung Hee (1917–79), the leader of a 1961 military coup who ruled Korea for eighteen years until his own intelligence chief assassinated him, and who is still revered by many as the father of modern Korea. Although her 2012 victory over former top Roh Moo Hyun aide Moon Jae In had not been overwhelming (she had defeated him by 51.6 to 48 percent), she was nonetheless something of a political darling. In the last quarter of 2016, all that changed when a media bombshell burst. Korean news organizations had discovered that sixty-year-old Choi Soon Sil, allegedly a shaman or medium and the holder of no public office, had been improperly and illegally influencing the official decisions of her longtime friend President Park and the Park administration.

A special investigation later found that Park had relied heavily on Choi in the handling of key matters both foreign and domestic. Exploiting her close ties to the president, Choi had pressured business leaders and government officials for personal gain. While scandals involving presidential relatives have not been uncommon in Korean history, a corruption case directly implicating the president was something new (former presidents Chun Doo Hwan and Roh Tae Woo had gone to jail in 1996, but that had been for their roles in coup-plotting).

The news of the “Choi-gate” scandal infuriated the public, and Park’s approval rating dropped through the floor, plunging in just weeks to a microscopic 4 percent, the lowest ever for a Korean president. Park tried apologizing repeatedly, but this did not assuage public anger. Calls began to rise for her to be investigated, with critics urging her to resign or face impeachment. In the eyes of much of the public, she stood condemned as a figure who had violated democratic principles and regressed toward practices that smacked of the country’s authoritarian past. From the first protests on 29 October 2016 to the Constitutional Court’s final impeachment verdict on 10 March 2017, tens of millions took part in the street protests, mainly in the capital city of Seoul but also across the country. Smaller rallies organized by Park supporters took place as well.

While the process of ousting Park was dramatic and the outcome was unprecedented, change in Korea has often been driven by civil society. This has largely been due to the weakness of Korean political parties.
A typical party is built around a single leader at the center, without a strong party base grounded in grassroots demands or interests. Political scientists call Korea’s parties “cadre parties” (elite- rather than mass-oriented), “electoral-professional parties” (focused on winning office rather than enacting platforms), and “catchall parties” (not reflecting the interests of any particular class or group). In Korea, civil society organizations do the work of aggregating interests and addressing demands that parties do in systems where they are stronger.

The 2016–17 protests illustrate this. As with past drives for political reform, the impetus for impeachment came from civil society. Opposition-party leaders, including Moon Jae In, were hesitant at first. They worried that their support might backfire: In the election after the failed Roh impeachment, many legislators who had voted for it lost their seats. After Choi-gate blew up, politicians trailed civic protesters, joining them only after it became clear that popular discontent with the Park regime had grown so fierce that impeachment was becoming a real option.

Still, some important differences set the 2016–17 protests apart from earlier ones. The 1987 demonstrations—the most momentous in Korean history since they sparked a transition to democracy during the second half of that year—had mostly been led by students and backed by labor groups, including white-collar workers. Their goal was clear: democratization. These groups challenged the existing authoritarian political order by means of demonstrations that often involved intense and even violent confrontations with the authorities. By comparison, the 2016–17 protests were far more diverse and largely peaceful. Although labor groups and other social-movement organizations did most of the organizing, nontraditional groups such as housewives and the elderly took part, and spontaneous participation was much more in evidence than it had been three decades earlier. Most importantly, the 2016–17 demonstrators were not calling for a new democratic order, but rather voicing anger that their country’s top political leader had abused existing democratic institutions. With no eruptions of violence, citizens respected and strictly adhered to democratic rules and norms.

At the time, some Western observers wondered why Park should resign or face impeachment. Was not the investigation still underway? Were not the calls for her to leave office a sign that Korean democracy was in retreat and at the mercy of populist forces? According to such observers, Koreans would be wise to wait for their president to at least
be proven guilty in court; the rule of law would seem to require no less. As one British commentator put it:

The president, for her part, can claim, with some credibility that so far she has been tried only in the court of public opinion; that in South Korea’s rumour-prone, scandal-hungry media environment in which prosecutors have been known in the past to leak information to skew public debate, she has been denied natural justice and the presumption of innocence until proven guilty.

In a Gallup Korea poll conducted in early December 2016, as the demonstrations were peaking, 37 percent of the respondents who disapproved of President Park cited Choi and her two foundations (the main vehicles for the alleged embezzlement) as the top reason for their attitude. No other reason ranked so high as a source of disapproval.

In order to fully grasp the nature of citizens’ actions, it is important to understand Korea’s political culture and the roles that values related to virtue, shame, and “saving face” play in it. Many citizens expressed feelings not only of disappointment and betrayal, but also of embarrassment and shame when they heard the charges against President Park. Those who had voted for her in the last election wondered if this was the country in which they had taken such pride owing to its rapid achievement of economic development and political democracy. To them, Park’s misbehavior represented a retreat back toward the authoritarian years and a rejection of the democratic principles that they had fought so hard to establish.

By violating the canons of democratic governance, in other words, Park had shamed the nation. In the protesters’ eyes, the president had lost “the mandate of heaven.” This ancient concept has roots in imperial China and was later adopted by the Chosun Dynasty (1392–1897), the last and longest-lived Confucian dynasty to rule the Korean Peninsula. Whether the mandate is lost depends on the virtue of the emperor; if he does not fulfill his obligations as emperor, then he loses the mandate and with it the right to continue ruling. Calls for Park’s impeachment were aided by this deep cultural current, which later received some acknowledgment in the Constitutional Court’s final ruling that Park had “betrayed the trust of the people.”

It is worth stressing that the protests shaped by Korea’s distinct political culture not only played a crucial role in the impeachment campaign, but did so while staying strictly within the bounds of democratic rules and procedures. According to the constitution, a motion to impeach a sitting president must pass the National Assembly by a two-thirds vote. The nine-member Constitutional Court must then also uphold the resulting impeachment resolution with at least six justices voting for it. The Court was established in 1988, during the democratic transition, and is one of the key institutions of liberal democracy in Korea. The Court’s
powers include the authority to 1) review the constitutionality of statutes; 2) dissolve political parties; 3) make the final decision on whether the president and other high-ranking officials are to be removed from office upon having been duly impeached by the legislature; and 4) adjudicate disputes between governmental entities.  

The impeachment bill cleared the National Assembly with an overwhelming 234 votes on 9 December 2016, and Park was suspended from office. Given that her party controlled 122 seats, it seems that at least 56 Saenuri legislators defected to support the impeachment (the voting had been held via secret ballot). Prime Minister Hwang Kyo Ahn immediately became acting president. The Constitutional Court’s unanimous ruling came early in March 2017, ending Park’s presidency. In the judgment, Acting Chief Justice Lee Jung Mi wrote that throughout her time in office, Park had committed “acts that violated the Constitution and laws” and that “were of the kind that cannot be tolerated for the sake of protecting the Constitution.” At the end of March, Park was arrested on criminal charges stemming from the actions that had cost her the presidential office. On May 23, her trial began in Seoul’s Central District Court. As of this writing in August 2017, the proceedings are still underway.

### The 2016 and 2017 Elections

Looking back, it is clear that the April 2016 election results had shaped events. Park’s ruling Saenuri Party had been expected to notch a big win, possibly including a rare two-thirds majority in the Assembly, since the Democratic Party, its main opposition, had split in two just months before. If Saenuri had won, or if Park had properly addressed the popular discontents that the elections had laid bare, her impeachment would likely never have been demanded, much less passed.

Yet the 2016 voters had a surprise in store. Upending expectations, they handed Saenuri a sharp setback, dropping it from 157 to 122 seats and giving the Democrats 123 seats (see Table 1). The Democrats’ preelectoral split had given rise to the new Kungmin (People’s) Party, which captured 38 seats. Most of these (23) the party owed to its strong support in the Honam region, which occupies the southwestern part of the Korean Peninsula and is a traditional bastion of the left. Another party, called Chongui (Justice), plus a set of independents captured the remaining 17 seats, although many of these lawmakers migrated to Saenuri or Democratic ranks once elected.

Behind the surprise outcome lay public dissatisfaction with the Park administration on issues that ranged from its failure to keep campaign promises to problems in the economy to lingering anger over nomination disputes within Saenuri. Many Koreans worried as well about income inequality, unemployment among youth, poverty among the old, exces-
sive household debt, and the threat that authoritarian practices might make a comeback. Many felt restive after a decade of conservative rule. Park never seemed to grasp the true extent of this public discontent. A sign of her arrogance was her casual decision to promote her former political secretary as Saenuri’s new leader.

The rise of multipartism—though not, perhaps, its ability to endure as the dominant format of democratic political competition in Korea—can also be read in the 2016 results. Saenuri finished first in the closed-list proportional-representation (PR) voting that was used to fill 47 seats, or 16 percent of the Assembly. Behind Saenuri’s 33.5 percent came the People’s Party (the group that had broken away from the Democratic Party in early 2016) with 26.7 percent, trailed by the Democrats with 25.5 percent.9

In addition, exit polls by South Korea’s three main broadcasters showed that the People’s Party had drawn voters not only from the Democratic Party but also from Saenuri: Almost 21 percent of those who backed a Democratic candidate and nearly 13 percent of those who voted for a Saenuri candidate also opted for the People’s Party in the closed-list PR voting.10 The 2016 outcome thus made People Party’s leader Ahn Cheol Soo, a 54-year-old physician and successful software entrepreneur, credible as a presidential candidate. Ahn had put himself forward as an independent candidate for the presidency in 2012 before withdrawing a month before the vote and throwing his support to Moon Jae In.

The most important immediate lesson of the 2016 election had to do with President Park, however. The voting showed that she and her party were in a weakened position, and not well placed to ride out a crisis, should one come.

Of course the crisis did come, and Park fell in March 2017. Just two months later, on 9 May 2017, voters went to the polls to choose a new

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**Table 1—Results for South Korea’s 2016 National Assembly Elections and 2017 Presidential Election**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>National Assembly Elections</th>
<th>Presidential Election</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seats</td>
<td>Party-List Vote (%)</td>
<td>Seat Share (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Democratic Party of Korea</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>25.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Frontier (Saenuri) Party/Liberty Korea Party*</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>33.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The People’s Party</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Justice Party</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Righteous Party**</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independents</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* In February 2017, the New Frontier Party renamed itself the Liberty Korea Party.
** In January 2017, anti-Park members of the New Frontier Party split off to form the Righteous Party.
president. Moon Jae In’s win was expected. It was his second try for the highest office: In 2012, he had lost to Park by 3.6 percentage points. This time, he never trailed in the polls, though Ahn came close a few times. In the unusual five-way contest, Moon garnered just over 41 percent, outdistancing runner-up Hong Joon Pyo of the Liberty Korea Party (as Saenuri had renamed itself) by 17 percentage points. Hong carried three southeastern provinces inland from the large port cities of Busan and Ulsan. Moon carried the rest of the country, including the capital city of Seoul. Turnout topped 77 percent, making it the highest since Kim Dae Jung of the National Congress for New Politics had won the presidency in 1997 and accepted the first peaceful handover of power to an opposition party in Korean history.

In impeachment’s wake, voters deemed Moon to be the best candidate to set things right and make necessary reforms. In a postelection Gallup Korea poll, the top two reasons that respondents gave for choosing him were “to clean up deeply rooted evils” (20 percent) and to handle the “transfer of power” (17 percent). These results confirmed an earlier Gallup Korea poll, conducted a week before the election, in which 27 percent of respondents (the highest share to back any candidate) said that they considered Moon to be the likeliest contender to bring about change and reform. After holding power under Park and, before her, President Lee Myung Bak (2008–13), conservatives had run into some of the “voter fatigue” that often besets long-ruling parties in democracies. Park’s scandals and the impeachment drama intensified this effect and set the stage for the center-left Moon’s win.

Still more decisive, however, may have been the splintering of the formidable conservative voter base among Hong, the younger and strongly enterprise-friendly Ahn, and Yu Seong Min of the center-right Righteous Party, a dissident Saenuri faction that had split off to back Park’s impeachment. Together, Hong, Ahn, and Yu won 52.2 percent of the vote, outstripping Moon by a handy 11 percentage points. Indeed, in most regions, Moon won fewer votes in 2017 than he had in 2012 but was able to win easily anyway as conservatives failed to unify.

Regionalism, a dominant element in previous Korean presidential elections, was less in evidence in 2017. In 2012, Moon won a vote share approaching 90 percent in the Jeolla region (southwestern Korea), while Park garnered 80 percent in the southern-interior city and province of Taegu–North Kyongsang (known as TK). This time Moon carried Jeolla again, but with a smaller majority. Hong took TK and South Kyongsang Province (where he had been governor), but only as a plurality winner.

In contrast to the fading of regionalism, the sharp generational divide seen in 2012 made itself vividly apparent five years later. Those between ages 20 and 59 supported Moon—indeed, he was the plurality
winner among fifty-somethings, as he had not been in 2012—while those 60 and older voted for Hong (see Table 2). Moon’s 2017 showing among voters in their fifties, it should be added, was less a token of his growing appeal than another effect of disunity in the conservative base: Ahn and Hong between them won 52.2 percent of this demographic, but they split it almost down the middle, with Hong just edging Ahn.

**Moon’s Presidency**

At the time of this writing in August 2017, a few months into his transitionless presidency, Moon has been well received by the public, notching weekly approval ratings that have ranged from 70 to 84 percent. While lofty approval numbers for a new president are hardly surprising, no chief executive of the democratic era has reached figures such as these (Kim Young Sam came the closest, topping 70 percent approval in the early 1990s). Moon’s Democratic Party is also riding high. Its approval rating has been above 50 percent—exceeding the approval rating of all the other parties combined—since Moon took office. So far, Moon has displayed a personality markedly different from Park’s. The public sees him as an approachable person who communicates well with key stakeholders. With the public behind him and the opposition in disarray, Moon is in a favorable position to pursue his policy agenda despite the lack of a Democratic Party majority in the Assembly.

First, he has a rare chance to reshape the courts. In Korea as elsewhere, the judiciary has grown more important since democratization, despite a strong executive branch. Korea, like France and Germany, has both a Supreme Court and a Constitutional Court. During his term, Moon will be able to make key appointments to both, though with his party controlling only 40 percent of the Assembly, getting the simple majorities needed to confirm judges could prove a challenge. At the Supreme Court, the post of chief justice as well as twelve additional seats (out of fifteen total) will be vacant. The nine-member Constitutional Court will also need a new chief justice as well as five other new justices. Moon has already nominated Judge Kim Yi Soo to the top post at the Constitutional Court. Kim was the only member of the Constitutional Court
who dissented when, in December 2014, it handed down a ruling that dissolved the Unified Progressive Party. The Park administration had accused this small leftist formation of threatening national security via activities meant to support communist North Korea, including planned sabotage in the event of war.

Given his party’s Assembly minority, Moon has a dire need to find means of working with other parties. Following the National Assembly Advancement Act of 2012, it now takes a three-fifths majority of all Assembly members (180 votes) to pass major bills. While helping to reduce the ruling party’s legislative influence over the opposition, not to mention physical clashes in the Assembly, the Act also constrains the ruling party’s ability to pass major bills. Despite President Moon’s personal popularity, his administration has been running into difficulties in confirming its key appointments and passing bills, including one to reorganize the government-ministry structure. Moon’s first major policy initiative, a plan to add 810,000 public-sector jobs as a way to ease youth unemployment, stalled despite his public pleas. It took 44 days for the Assembly to pass the supplemental budget bill (worth US$10 billion) needed to pay for the scheme.

As Moon struggles to overcome such constraints, economic and national-security challenges continue to mount. The stock market has been hitting record highs and Korea’s foreign trade is doing well, but the economic situation inside the country is not good. Household debt has gone up every quarter since 2014, and is projected to reach an all-time high equaling nearly 93 percent of GDP by the end of 2017. People between 15 and 29 face an unemployment rate that in February 2016 reached 12.5 percent, the highest since the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s. Korea is now one of the Asia-Pacific region’s least equal societies, with the wealthiest tenth of the populace receiving close to half (45 percent) of total income.

The Moon administration immediately established a “job-creation committee,” but it will not be easy to amass the financial resources needed to create new jobs: Since 2010, successive Korean governments have struggled with rising budget deficits. Critics charge that Moon’s policies are populist nostrums of the type that previous administrations have proposed, and that they would cause national bankruptcy were they all to be enacted.14 Moon proposed raising taxes on capital gains and the rich, but his critics say that this is just more populism and still would not pay the bills that he proposes to run up. There may be widespread general agreement that “economic democratization” is needed, but the details of how to achieve that—including how to reform the huge, family-run business conglomerates known as chaebol—remain unclear.15

Economic uncertainties underlay the impeachment movement. Phrases in vogue among South Koreans under forty reflect the social discontent, fueled by youth unemployment and inequality, that was on display in the demonstrations: “Hell Chosun” (using another name for
Korea), “golden spoons, dirt spoons” (one’s life course is predetermined by one’s family background), “gapjil” (impunity, the powerful picking on the weak), and “sampo generation” (a generation forced to give up [“pogi”] on three [“sam”] things—courtship, marriage, and children). Young people hoping for change strongly backed Moon. If he fails to live up to their expectations, social discontent and protest will likely return.

Moon also faces difficult national-security challenges whose handling could bring him into conflict with his progressive identity. Unlike in the authoritarian past, the president of a democratic Korea must be sensitive to public opinion while addressing foreign and security affairs. In these matters, however, today’s Korea is a “house divided.”16 In the Korean context, “progressives” hold a critical view of the country’s longstanding alliance with the United States, and support “engagement” with the North. Conservatives take the diametrically opposed position on both issues. Reaching any kind of compromise, let alone a consensus, has been difficult, to say the least.

President Moon, like his late mentor Roh Moo Hyun, may have to make harsh choices in security affairs that will displease his main constituents. President Roh, for example, decided to send Korean troops to Iraq in 2003, and in 2007 signed the United States–Korea Free Trade Agreement. Both these steps angered his base and reduced him to premature lame-duck status. Moon may be facing a similar thicket in the matter of the U.S.-built Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) antimissile system that began deploying to Korea in April 2017, after Park’s removal from office but before the snap election. With Moon’s key supporters opposing THAAD, he spent his campaign embracing “strategic ambiguity” with regard to the system.

In early June 2017, a little less than a month after taking office, Moon suspended the deployment of further THAAD units. He stressed the need for “increased procedural justification,” including environmental-impact studies of possible effects from the radiation emitted by the system’s powerful radar.17 But as Moon has stated, extra attention to procedure does not mean cancellation. In fact, he has ordered deployment of additional THAAD launchers in the face of North Korea’s ballistic-missile test. Yet for Moon, the political risk remains that approving full deployment could alienate key supporters (not to mention China) and leave him in a badly weakened position.

What Kind of Reform?

President Moon will also have to take on the problem of constitutional reform. The single five-year term that presidents are allowed is a product of the 1980s, when the democracy movement was eager to shut off any path back to long-term rule by a single president. After three
years, there is a near-unanimous consensus that the single-term presidency has outlived its usefulness. The Korean chief executive has many powers, but the one-term limit means that “lame-duck” status sets in after four or even just three years in office, with predictably poor implications for long-term policy making. The most recent Gallup Korea poll, conducted in October 2016, shows that more than half of respondents (n=1,033) supported reform, an increase from 46 percent in June 2016, with the difference between party affiliations narrowing.\(^{18}\)

The problem is what kind of new system to adopt. Preferences are split among a four-year presidency that allows for reelection, a parliamentary system in which the executive power is vested in the majority party of the legislature, or a semipresidential system in which the president oversees diplomacy and military affairs while a prime minister handles domestic policy. Moon promised to fold a constitutional referendum into the local elections set for June 2018, but it remains to be seen whether this will happen. It will require a two-thirds vote of the Assembly before any constitutional proposal can go to the voters. Park Geun Hye and before her Lee Myung Bak promised such reforms during their campaigns but dropped the idea once in office.

Will Moon’s experience in the presidency turn out to resemble that of Roh Moo Hyun, the last progressive chief executive? Moon was not only Roh’s chief of staff, but had been a fellow human-rights lawyer from the same town and a close personal friend before Roh got into electoral politics. When the National Assembly impeached Roh in 2004, Moon headed his defense team. After Roh’s suicide in 2009, Moon joined the opposition Democratic United Party (today’s Democrats) with the aim of continuing his friend’s work. He even wrote in his best-selling memoir that he considered meeting Roh a matter of “destiny.”\(^{19}\)

The Moon administration is staffed by a number of Roh-era veterans. Among them is Trade Minister Kim Hyun Chong, who during his earlier stint in that job (from 2004 to 2007) spearheaded more than forty free-trade deals including one with the United States. Of particular importance, experts point to the return of “3(5)86” politicians\(^{20}\) and former activists to key posts. Moon’s chief of staff, Im Jong Seok, had begun as a student activist (and opponent of the U.S. alliance) in the 1980s. Chang Ha Sung, who heads the reinstated Office of State Policy (a wing of the presidential administration founded by Roh but abolished by Lee Myung Bak), was also a key figure at a major progressive NGO.

General similarities between Roh and Moon certainly exist. Both represent progressive, antiestablishment forces in Korea, especially in terms of keeping big business and the public prosecutor’s office in check. Both stress social equality and the welfare of the poor; support balanced regional development and local autonomy; and generally favor engaging the North. Moon plans to use the restored Office of State Policy to oversee major policies at the level of the ministries.
Yet Moon is backed by a far more decisive winning margin than the narrowly elected Roh could ever have claimed. The 64-year-old Moon, moreover, has more experience than Roh did at the time he became president. Moon has served in the Blue House (the seat of the presidency) and been the leader of a major opposition party. Roh was an outsider even in his own party, while Moon represents his party’s mainstream. Roh is seen as having failed to carry out his progressive agenda due to inexperience and “amateurism.” In comparison, Moon seems to have made better preparations during the last two terms of conservative rule, surrounding himself with a massive number of advisers and experts. This is in sharp contrast to Roh, who did not have access to such manpower during his years in office. In foreign policy, Moon appears to place more emphasis on the value of the U.S. alliance than did Roh. Overall, there is a high expectation that Moon will pursue a progressive agenda like Roh’s and will do better in implementing it, having learned lessons from the Roh years.

Crisis or Growing Pains?

Thirty years after its original transition to democracy, Korea by all accounts has made steady progress toward a maturing realization of that form of government. Free and fair elections, peaceful transfers of political power (in 1998 and 2017), and the freedoms of speech and the press all attest to this. In Freedom House’s widely cited Freedom in the World survey covering 2016 (the most recent one available), Korea scores a 2 on the 7-point Freedom House scales for both political rights and civil liberties (a 1 signifies most free). Yet political corruption remains a curse—charges of it have dogged every ex-president. On Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index for 2016, Korea ranks 52nd of 176 countries surveyed (the lower the ranking on this scale, the less corruption-prone a society is seen to be by key stakeholders such as business investors). Nearby Japan and Taiwan do far better, ranking 20th and 31st, respectively. The Park impeachment gave the world a sense of how intense popular anger at corruption has become as it smolders just below the surface of Korean society.

Has the failure of another Korean president damaged public faith in democracy? Is Korean democracy showing signs of the populism and deinstitutionalization that we see in Europe and elsewhere? The events of 2016–17 did not betoken a crisis of the underlying democratic system or even of normal politics in Korea. Social protest is an important reality in Korea, and on balance a functional one: Demonstrations helped to bring about the democratic transition three decades ago, and they have generally aided the cause of democratic consolidation since then. Sociologist Cho Hui Yeon calls Korea a “two-track democracy,” with “institutionalized politics” and “movement politics” interacting and complementing each other in order to advance democratization.
Far from bespeaking a crisis, the 2016–17 protests galvanized Korean politics through broad civic participation and respect for constitutional procedures: The crowds in the streets were peaceful, and the entire impeachment process went forward strictly according to established law. Yet not all the news is good. We have again witnessed the spectacle of a weak and ineffectual political-party system floundering as it tries to produce policies that respond to social demands. Rather than effectively translating citizens’ demands into institutionalized politics, party leaders at first held back, then followed protesters into the streets. We also cannot rule out the possibility that impeachment will become trivialized and routinized, turning into a standard maneuver in Korean politics. Active civic participation in politics is encouraging, but without well-functioning political parties, Korea could end up with an overly politicized society that does not bode well for the future of its democracy.

Nonetheless, we can take heart from surveying impeachment’s orderly and peaceful unfolding. The sight of a president being removed from office and then tried in criminal court—along with the February 2017 arrest of Lee Jae Yong, the heir apparent of Samsung, on bribery charges—sent a message that no one in Korea, no matter how powerful and rich, is above the law. Twenty years ago, such arrests would have been unthinkable: The standards of transparency and fairness in Korean politics have been raised. That is a positive sign that Korea is still maturing into a fuller and deeper democracy.

NOTES

1. Saenuri was the rebranded Grand National Party, Korea’s main right-of-center political formation. Its ultimate ancestor is the Democratic Republican Party, founded in 1963 by Park Geun Hye’s father, military strongman President Park Chung Hee.


9. The country is divided into 253 single-member districts (SMDs). Each voter casts two votes, one for an individual candidate and one for a party. If a party passes a threshold of five SMDs or 3 percent of the total vote, it is qualified to receive party-list seats.


15. They include Hyundai, Samsung, and Lotte.


20. When this term was coined, it referred to those who were in their thirties, having been born in the 1960s and gone to college in the 1980s. Thus it means activists-turned-politicians who are now in their fifties.

