

The Impeachment of South Korean President Park Geun-hye

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Abstract

This project explores the timeline and details of South Korean President, Park Geun-hye's impeachment, and the aftermath that followed. Park Geun-hye's history begins with her father's military takeover of the South Korean government in 1961ⁱ, the assassination of her mother and father,ⁱⁱ her handling and alleged mismanagement of the Sewol Ferry Disaster, and her ties to the Choi family.

Introduction

The second assassination attempt of former President Park Chung-hee proved successful where the first one, which inadvertently killed his wife (President Park Geun-hye's mother), did not. Park Chung-hee was killed by his close friend and head of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency, Kim Jae-kyu.ⁱⁱⁱ He stated during his testimony before his execution, that one of his reasons for killing Park Chung-hee was his lack of action in stopping Choi's corruption and taming the influence of Choi Tae-min over Park Chung-hee's daughter, future president of South Korea, Park Geun-hye.^{iv} Telling the story of how Park Geun-hye was impeached involves unpacking the relationships of a complex family history, a religious mentor, and a best friend—turned unofficial aide—that all worked to undo Korea's first female President.

Six weeks is all the time it took for the National Assembly to vote to impeach President Park Geun-hye and only a few months more before she was ousted from the Blue House and charged with bribery, abuse of presidential power, and leaking state secrets. On October 24, 2016 news broke of an inappropriate relationship between President Park and her unofficial aide, Choi Soon-sil. President Park apologized on October 25th but was seen as aloof and insincere sparking the first candle light protest of more than 20,000 Koreans outside the Blue House.^v By December 3rd the public outcry had culminated into a deafening roar of over 1 million protestors that the South Korean National Assembly could no longer ignore, and a bill was introduced to impeach her. In one week's time, the National Assembly voted overwhelmingly in favor (234 yeas, 56 nays), and less than three months later the Constitutional Court upheld the impeachment in a unanimous 8-0 decision.^{vi} The lightning speed with which the Korean government responded to the public's demands is a seeming triumph of liberal democracy and the exercise of the legitimate power of the people to influence their elected government.

President Park's rapid removal from office is better understood within the context of her family history and personal alliances. This project overviews the complex history of the Park family, their connections to alleged cult leaders, and how these played a significant role in her impeachment. Further, the Sewol Ferry Disaster that took place on April 16, 2014 is outlined

and discussed within the context of the public's dwindling trust in President Park's administration.

Park Geun-hye

President Park Geun-hye's first introduction into public life was to fill the void left by the assassination of her mother by taking over as the acting first lady of South Korea in 1974.^{vii} The assassination of Yuk Young-soo was not deliberate, but rather a botched assassination attempt of her husband (Park Geun-hye's father), Park Chung-hee, the authoritarian leader of South Korea. Park Chung-hee came to power after leading a successful military coup in 1961 and remained in power until his death in 1979. He was killed at dinner by Kim Jae-kyu, a longtime friend and director of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency.ⁱⁱⁱ During his trial, Kim Jae-kyu confessed that one of his motives for killing the late President was his refusal in responding to the corrupt activities of Choi Tae-min (an alleged cult leader and associate to Park Chung-hee) and his immense influence over Park's daughter, Park Geun-hye.^{viii}

After the death of her father, Park all but disappeared from public life. She re-emerged in 1997 and was elected to the National Assembly, winning consecutive re-elections until 2012 when she won the presidency. In 2004, she became the chairperson for the Grand National Party and remained so until 2006.^{vii} One year later she made her first presidential bid and was confronted with allegations of corruption and impropriety from one of her own party members, Kim Hae-ho.^{ix} He accused her of receiving a house and other favors in return for her preferential treatment to contractors while she was the chairperson of Yeongnam University. Park ran for president again in 2012 and recalled to the voters minds' her father's slogan, "Let's live well," promising another economic revival in the country.^x She became the first woman president in South Korean history. Nevertheless, the country was deeply divided on their view of her, given the divisive opinions of her father's authoritarian rule.

Sewol Ferry Disaster

Two years into her presidency, the MV Sewol ferry capsized killing 304 crew and passengers, most of whom were high school students on a field trip from Danwon High School.^{xi} The initial public outrage was at President Park's lack of engagement during the initial seven hours of the disaster. These public outcries mounted as evidence of misconduct, corruption, and government mishandling of the event became public.

The MV Sewol began to make a series of "unreasonably sudden turns" at **8:48 AM** on the morning of April 16, 2014. The net result of these turns caused the Sewol to list 20° sending improperly secured cargo careening from one side of the ship to the other exacerbating the list to 30°. By **8:50 AM** the chief engineer ordered the evacuation of the engine room and at **8:52 AM** announcements began instructing passengers to stay in their rooms. It wasn't until **8:55 AM** that the crew initiated the first official distress call, a full three minutes after concerned passenger Choi Duk-ha placed a call to the National Emergency Response Center. At **8:58 AM** the Coast Guard dispatched a single patrol vessel. At **9:30 AM** Captain Lee Jun-seok ordered the evacuation of the ship, however; by this point the internal communications system was inoperative and most of the passengers never received the evacuation instructions and stayed in their rooms as previously ordered. At **9:38 AM** the Coast Guard vessel began rescue operations and by **9:46 AM** the captain and other crew were rescued. Just two hours and twenty minutes after the initial perilous maneuvers that caused the ship to list, the bow of the ship was submerged, and by **1:03 PM** the entire ship was underwater. Special operations divers were dispatched at **2:42 PM** and began underwater rescue operations at **5:00 PM**. Eleven days later,

Prime Minister Chung Hong-won accepted responsibility and resigned. On June 24, 2014 the death toll was declared at 294 with 10 still missing. The body of Yoo Byung-eun, (the owner of the ferry company and head of a minor chaebol that had been the beneficiary of lax government oversight allowing for unapproved modifications to the ship) was identified on July 21, 2014—cause of death remains unknown.^{xii} Captain Lee Joon-seok was found guilty of gross negligence and sentenced to 36 years in prison. Chief Engineer Park, found guilty of murder, was sentenced to 30 years in prison. Then, on April 28, 2015 an appeal overruled Captain Lee Joon-seok’s original ruling, found him guilty of homicide, and increased his punishment to life in prison. In the same appellate case, Chief Engineer Park received a reduced sentence of 10 years in prison.^{xiii, xiv}

President Park’s administration disbanded the Coast Guard due to their gross incompetence in handling the Sewol Ferry disaster, however, the public outcry continued. Rumors circulated as to the whereabouts of the president including her being immersed in a cult-like séance, and another that she was getting her hair done. No evidence has been found to support either claim, but the prevalence of these rumors only existed because President Park refused to give an accounting of her whereabouts during the crisis. During the impeachment investigations, it was discovered that President Park blacklisted thousands of artists whose works spoke out against her administration. The public memory of President Park’s failures during this time were still fresh in the minds of South Koreans when news of her inappropriate relationship with Choi Soon-sil broke in October 2016.^{xv}

President Park’s Relationships:

To better understand how President Park was impeached it is important to first briefly describe her relationships and the network of people that surrounded her. Former President Park Chung-hee, Park Geun-hye’s father, was a military officer who took control of the Korean government in a coup in 1961.ⁱ Choi Tae-min was an associate of his, and was also the founder of a religious cult called Yongsanggyo. One of his roles in the first Park administration was to promote the President’s “‘New Community’ campaign, an ultra-nationalist movement that coupled infrastructure activities with grassroots fundraising.”^{ix} Choi Tae-min set up religious organizations to raise money for the campaign and it is alleged that some of these funds were funneled into Tae-min’s real-estate ventures and personal accounts. Despite Park Chung-hee’s assassination in 1979, Choi Tae-min remained a close mentor and confidant of Park Geun-hye until his death in 1994. Prior to his death, Choi Tae-min and Park Geun-hye came under allegations that he was also embezzling funds from the Yuk Young Foundation—established by Park’s mother—and is currently worth over \$2 billion. Choi Soon-sil, Choi Tae-min’s daughter, filled her father’s shoes as the close confidant and unofficial aide to President Park Geun-hye.

At the center of the scandal is Choi Tae-min’s daughter, Choi Soon-sil. Choi Soon-sil and Park Geun-hye’s relationship began in the 1970s and continued until her impeachment.^x An unofficial and un-appointed aide, Choi Soon-sil was revealed to have undue influence over President Park’s policies and speeches. Further, she used her relationship with Park Geun-hye to benefit her daughter, Chung Yoo-ra, who received an expensive horse from Samsung and admission to Ewha Womans University in Seoul.^{xvi} Choi Soon-sil established two organizations, Mir and K-sports, and used them to embezzle millions of dollars from companies including Samsung, Hyundai, SK, and LG. Her husband, Chung Yoon-hoie served as President Park’s Chief of Staff when she was a lawmaker, and in 2014 the media released a leaked document

accusing Chung Yoon-hoi of undue influence over several of Park's secretaries and contributing to the instability in her cabinet.

Another key figure in Park's administration is Woo Byung-woo who served as the Senior Presidential Secretary for Civil Affairs from 2015 to 2016. In February 2018, Woo Byung-woo was sentenced to two and a half years in prison for dereliction of duty, abuse of power and perjury.^{xvii} Woo Byung-woo was a former Prosecution Services (PS) prosecutor before his appointment into Park's administration. The presiding judge stated that, "Woo was aware of the illicit acts being committed by [Park's crony] Choi Soon-sil, yet failed to launch an investigation," implicating him in his dereliction of duty at the Blue House. The media continued its investigations into Mir and K-sports Foundations and listed him as a connection between Choi Soon-sil, President Park, and the companies that had given money to them. In December 2017, Woo was "arrested over allegations he instructed the state spy agency to monitor government officials and civilians."^{xviii} Woo's connections to the PS and their subsequent quasi-investigation as recorded by the media, "fueled public outrage by lending credence to the idea the PS was quietly aiding Choi."^{ix}

The role of the media in the impeachment of President Park is difficult to overstate. Many South Koreans felt that it was the media that was doing the job of the PS in investigating Woo Byung-woo and then Choi Soon-sil. News outlet JTBC obtained the infamous tablet that directly tied Choi Soon-sil to President Park. The tablet was not only confirmed to be Choi's, but it was verified that she used it to edit President Park's speeches and craft policy initiatives that were often times in direct contradiction to those of Park's advisors. The tablet was eventually handed over to the PS.

Aftermath:

The aftermath of South Korea's largest corruption scandal has seen the prosecution and sentencing of at least nine people both in the public and private sectors. Former President Park Geun-hye was sentenced to 24 years in prison and ordered to pay \$17 million in fines. The presiding judge, Kim Se-yoon had this to say at her televised sentencing, "The accused caused chaos in state affairs by abusing the power given to her by the people, and it is necessary to hold her responsible with a stern punishment so that similar things will not happen again."^{xix} Park has decided to not appeal her prison sentence.^{xx} Additionally, in an editorial piece, the *South China Morning Post* commented that "[Park's sentence] revealed the flaws of the 1987 democratic constitution, which has now failed to prevent five of the past six democratically elected presidents from falling from grace. She joins Lee Myung-bak, charged last month with corruption while in office, Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo, convicted for treason and corruption in the 1990s, and Roh Moo-hyun, who killed himself in 2009 while being investigated for graft."^{xxi}

On February 13, 2018 Choi Soon-sil, Park's associate and "co-conspirator" was sentenced to 20 years in prison.^{xvii} Kim Ki-choon, Park's chief of staff was sentenced to three years for abuse of power and perjury for orchestrating a blacklist and then lying about it under oath.^{xxii} Kim Jong-deok, "a former culture minister, was sentenced to two years on similar charges (as Kim Ki-choon)."^{xxix} Cho Yoon-sun "was convicted of perjury for lying about the blacklist before the National Assembly, but the Seoul Central District Court suspended her prison term and released her from jail on Thursday."^{xxix} Of Moon Hyung-pyo, "A Seoul court on Thursday sentenced a former South Korean health minister to two and a half years jail for his role in a corruption scandal that led to the impeachment and arrest of former president Park

Geun-hye.”^{xxiii} Kim Young-jae, a cosmetic surgeon, “was convicted of lying to a parliamentary hearing into the scandal. He had been accused of administering procedures on Park between 2014 and 2016 including Botox injections and not entering them in medical records.” Park Chae-yoon, Kim’s wife, “was sentenced to a year in prison, the court official said, for bribing one of Park’s presidential aides, An Chong-bum, and a former health ministry official to win support for Kim’s overseas business.”^{xxiv} Spy Chiefs Nam Jae-joon and Lee Byung-kee “who served under Park Geun-hye, the impeached former president, were arrested Friday on charges of illegally channeling tens of thousands of dollars a month from their agency’s secret budgets for Ms. Park’s private use. The arrests resulted from a campaign by Ms. Park’s successor, President Moon Jae-in, to root out what he called collusive ties between the president’s office and the National Intelligence Service, long accused of meddling in domestic politics.”^{xxv}

Within the private sector, Samsung chief Lee Jae-yong was originally sentenced by a lower court to five years in prison. However, an appeals court overturned the ruling and released Lee Jae-yong after nine months.^{xxvi} Shin Dong-bin, Lotte Group Chairman, was sentenced to, “two years and six months in prison in the same case [regarding Choi Soon-sil]. The jail term for Shin follows a December ruling in which the court found him guilty of breach of trust and embezzlement in a different case but suspended sentencing, leaving him free to run the group.”^{xxvii}

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