South Korea

Seoul searching

Whoever takes over from Park Geun-hye faces a daunting challenge, writes James Hannah

The Blue House is the official residence of the President of the Republic of Korea in Seoul. It sits in the north of the city, at the foot of the Bugaksan Mountain along the top of which the old city walls run.

In January 1968, a group of 31 North Korean commandos infiltrated Seoul, launching an assault on the compound in an unsuccessful assassination attempt on then President Park Chung-hee. The violence that ensued killed 26 South Koreans.

Today, a tree riddled with bullets from the firefight is a photo opportunity on the Bugaksan city wall hike, a walk which affords panoramic views of a glittering city which symbolizes South Korea’s story of rapid economic growth and modernization: ‘the miracle on the Han River’.

Park Chung-hee played a significant role in that story during the two decades in which he held power, before his eventual assassination by his security chief during a dinner in 1979.

He allied his increasingly authoritarian regime with the chaebol, the family-owned business houses, to create an establishment now facing a crisis of legitimacy by the departure from office of his daughter, the first female President of South Korea, Park Geun-hye, whose impeachment was confirmed by South Korea’s Constitutional Court on March 10.

The impeachment represents a potential turning point for South Korea. The scandal that propelled her from office has exposed deep political and generational schisms among the population, and brings into sharp focus the rising regional tensions on an axis that runs between Beijing and Washington DC through Pyongyang, Seoul and Tokyo. An election has been set for May 9. Whoever wins faces the daunting task of putting the country back together again, reforming a political and economic establishment engulfed in crisis and managing escalating tensions with all these capitals.

A country divided against itself?

When parliament voted overwhelmingly for impeachment in December 2016, opinion polls showed widespread support, approximately 75 per cent nationally, in favour.

With her immunity removed, Park is likely to face criminal charges for her part in a scandal that has gripped the nation. It began with protests on the campus of Ewha Woman’s University against the admission of a student who was the daughter of an informal adviser of Park’s, Choi Soon-sil. Dubbed the ‘Korean Rasputin’, Choi is the centre of the resulting storm. With no formal position, she built an empire of influence that included establishing charitable foundations through which she accrued donations on the strength of her presidential connections. From the small beginnings of campus protest the scandal mushroomed, as investigations exposed Choi operating with shocking impunity.

The more sensational aspects of the relationship between Park and Choi have included control of the president’s wardrobe, participation in supposed ‘shamanist rituals’ in the Blue House and the murky relationship between Choi’s father, a former cult leader, and Park which developed after her own father’s assassination.

Choi has been in custody since October, saying to prosecutors: ‘Please forgive me, I’m sorry, I have committed a sin that deserves death.’ She was charged in November for her role in soliciting funds for her foundations, and subsequently siphoning them off for her own use.

Samsung, the nation’s flagship business and largest chaebol, is deeply implicated, and Lee Jae-yong, son of the incapacitated chairman and de facto head of the conglomerate, has been arrested and charged with a range of offences including bribery and embezzlement. Samsung is said to have paid donations of more than $35 million to Choi’s organizations, linked to support it sought for mergers and political influence.

The candlelight protest movement which emerged calling for Park to quit has been organizing mass actions since October 2016. It has brought together those outraged by Park’s behaviour, eventually encompassing a range of concerns about corruption and the defence of liberal democratic norms. As the impeachment decision neared, a rival protest movement grew, bringing together members of the older generations who supported President Park. With a memory of the Korean War and a more indulgent view of the collusion between business and government which drove development, this ‘National Flag’ movement sees the younger generations as indifferent to North Korea.

Despite the mass protests of different hues, no new political party has emerged to represent these divergent interests, and only time will tell if an election can put these genies back in their bottles.

The frontrunner to succeed Park as pres-
ident is Moon Jae-in, who was defeated by Park in the election of 2012. Moon is from the progressive end of the political spectrum, and despite his established political credentials he appears best positioned to cash the dividend of discontent.

The one other case of impeachment in South Korea’s history took place in the 1990s, when President Roh Moo-hyun beat the charges brought against him. Moon Jae-in served as chief of staff to President Roh, and legal counsel during the corruption proceedings he faced.

Though the charges were defeated, Roh Moo-hyun subsequently committed suicide after he had left office as he remained under pressure of further investigation. There is an argument that Moon Jae-in sees himself as a defender of that administration’s legacy, which included a ‘sunshine policy’ of engagement rather than confrontation with the nation’s hostile neighbour to the north and a stronger line against the chaebol’s influence on policy and role in the economy. Youth unemployment is at 9 per cent, and South Korea is the world’s fastest ageing society, so the generational divisions exposed run deep.

A sharpened strategic dilemma
This all comes at a time when tensions have increased markedly on the peninsula and throughout the wider region. The alleged assassination of Kim Jong-nam, the half-brother of North Korea’s ruler, Kim Jong-un, at Kuala Lumpur International Airport on February 13, thrust the regime in Pyongyang even further into the global spotlight. In the week leading up to Park’s impeachment, several events took place that further fed the fire. On Monday March 6, the latest missile tests were undertaken by Pyongyang, with three missiles fired into the seas off the coast of Japan.

Two days later news photos confirmed the arrival in Seoul of the first components of the THAAD missile-defence system that the US will install in line with its commitment to defend South Korea from attack. The deployment of THAAD has angered China, which sees it as an expanded network of US containment and fears the surveillance implications of the radar components of its own missile arsenal.

Chinese visitors account for approximately half of all tourism to South Korea, and Chinese tour companies have been instructed to stop booking visits in retaliation.

Into this pressure cooker steps the administration of Donald Trump. On a visit to the region, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson stated in Seoul on March 17 that ‘the policy of strategic patience has ended’. This means that sanctions aimed at bringing the North Koreans to the table for talks on its nuclear programme have been deemed insufficient. Statements that ‘all options are on the table’ presumably include the possibility of US military intervention. Trump has repeatedly used Twitter to criticize Chinese inaction on bringing its erstwhile ally into line.

Whoever wins the South Korean election in May will face a daunting set of challenges, and a timescale to solve them that may not be under their control. Fostering unity at home, and seeking pragmatic support and balance abroad, will test South Korea’s new leader from the very moment of taking office.

Paralysed by the gridlock of scandal for months, post-election Korean policy decisions will have an impact far beyond its own splintered domestic landscape. It feels as if South Korea, long defined by the relationship with its Northern counterpart, is increasingly at the centre of a global realignment.

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