

South Korea's Candlelight Movement President

South Korea's President Moon Jae-in is the standard bearer of the "candlelight movement," an outpouring of South Korean public demands for accountability in the wake of the allegations of corruption, extortion, and self-dealing against former President Park Geun-hye that led to her impeachment in fall 2016. Those allegations came to light when the Korean media found a lost laptop of Park's close friend and associate Choi Sun-sil containing incriminating evidence regarding Choi's efforts to use her close relationship with President Park to secure funds from the Samsung Corporation and other leading conglomerates for her daughter's equestrian career and

interests, first as a democratization movement leader and human rights lawyer in the 1980s, later as a top aide and chief of staff to progressive South Korean president and fellow human rights lawyer Roh Moo-hyun in 2003–08, and finally as the leader called to restore South Korean public faith in leadership and to bring about a less corrupt, more accountable government.

The circumstances under which Moon took office following Park's impeachment created an immediate need for inclusive and restorative leadership. Moon needed to restore the South Korean public's confidence in their president. Moon's comments at his inauguration the day after his election set the

right tone: "I will become an honest president who keeps his promises . . . Genuine political progress will be possible only when the president takes the initiative in engaging in politics that can garner trust. I will not talk big about doing something impossible. I will admit to the wrong I did. I will not cover up unfavorable public opinion with lies. I will be a fair president." Moon pledged both to restore public trust and set high expectations for his administration's performance.

In addition, Moon made striking efforts to emphasize that he was accessible and in tune with public sentiment, in contrast to the image of his cloistered and imperious predecessor. Moon had tea on the Blue House lawn with his new staff, visited Korean shop owners and factories, and fashioned an Obama-like image of accessibility and inclusion in his public appearances. Moon also established a national petition platform on the Blue House website that enabled the public to directly petition the Blue House and committed the government to respond if the public petition garnered support from 200,000 citizens within 30 days.

A second immediate challenge was the task of selecting a team of officials to build and implement Moon's policy platform without the benefit of time for a transition. In the initial weeks of his presidency, Moon was surrounded by hold-over appointees from a caretaker government largely appointed by Park. Having already assumed the office of the presidency, Moon had to appoint his own personal staff and select new cabinet ministers to lead the bureaucracy. Moon's first hundred days were more about gaining control over the levers of government than about implementing policy measures prepared in advance of his assumption of office.

Beyond those challenges, Moon inherited a daunting set of economic problems. South Korea's economy was beset with relatively low growth rates compared to prior historical performance benchmarks. Overdependence on export-led growth primarily gener-



Supporters of South Korea's former president Park Geun-hye gather during a rally demanding the release of Park Geun-hye outside the Seoul Central District Court in Seoul on April 6, 2018. (JUNG YEON-JE/AFP/GETTY IMAGES)

to secure a place for her daughter at the prestigious Ewha Womans University. These revelations mobilized the largest peaceful public protests since Korea's democratization in the late 1980s, with Moon and other progressive leaders at the forefront, tanking Park's public approval ratings to four percent.

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The massive withdrawal of public support led to Park's impeachment in December 2016 and removal from office in March 2017, followed by a constitutionally-mandated snap election held within 60 days of the Constitutional Court's impeachment ruling. Moon won with 41 percent of the vote over a fellow reformist, Ahn Cheol-soo, and a conservative rival, Hong Joon-pyo. For Moon, who had narrowly lost to Park five years earlier, the victory was vindication for a career spent promoting government accountability to public in-