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# The First Female President in South Korea: Park Geun-hye's Leadership and South Korean Democracy

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## Abstract

When Park Geun-hye was elected South Korea's first female president in 2012, many expected that South Korea's democracy would deepen. Contrary to the expectation, however, from the beginning of her administration, there were concerns about democracy retreating due to her leadership style/qualities. Despite her rather "undemocratic" leadership qualities, Park Geun-hye has consistently received 30% or higher job approval ratings until "Choi Soon-sil gate" broke out in October 2016. Thus, in this study, we analyzed what led to her leadership qualities and makes it possible for her to maintain a relatively high level of job approval ratings. We argue that her leadership qualities are the product of her unique personal background and South Korea's immature democratic institutions. She receives relatively strong support thanks to her father, President Park Chung-hee's (1961–1979) legacy.

## Keywords

Park Geun-hye, female president, job approval rate, leadership quality, democracy

## Introduction

Park Geun-hye was elected South Korea's eighteenth president in December 2012. She is the first president elected by a majority, not just by a plurality, of the vote since South Korea transitioned to democracy in 1987. She is also the first female president since the Republic of Korea was established in 1948. Considering politics has been dominated by male politicians in South Korea, electing a woman president was refreshing (Lee, 2016).

However, Park Geun-hye was impeached by the National Assembly on 9 December 2016 and was ousted from the office by the Constitutional Court on 10 March 2017. She was arrested and put

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on trial with charges of bribery, extortion, and power abuse. What caused this was the so-called “Choi-Soon-sil-gate.” The gate started when a TV station JTBC reported on 24 October 2016 a possibility of Choi Soon-sil playing an important role in policy making and personnel decisions based on evidence they collected from a tablet personal computer suspected to be Choi Soon-sil’s.<sup>1</sup> Serious concerns were raised about the role of Choi Soon-sil in the Park Geun-hye administration, and the National Assembly legislated to conduct a special investigation. After three months of investigation, the special prosecutor team indicted Park Geun-hye and Choi Soon-sil along with several of Park Geun-hye’s aides and cabinet members. The main charges were Choi Soon-sil’s illegal involvement in Park Geun-hye’s policy decisions and setting up two foundations for Korean culture and sports promotion to use them as a fundraising mechanism for her and Park Geun-hye.

The early termination of Park Geun-hye’s presidency (forty-sixth month of the sixty-month term) is shocking because there were high expectations of her administration as no woman had previously played an important role in South Korean politics. Thus, Park Geun-hye’s victory in the presidential election led to the belief that South Korea’s democratic system would further mature, and gender inequality in politics and society would improve.

Contrary to expectations, from the beginning of her administration, there were concerns about the deterioration of democracy in South Korea due to President Park Geun-hye’s leadership style/qualities. Critiques argue that during her tenure, restrictions and regulations on the press increased. In fact, Freedom House Index rates South Korea’s freedom of speech “partly free”<sup>2</sup> and the Press Freedom Index of Reporters Without Borders downgraded South Korea’s freedom of the press from fiftieth to sixtieth out of the 180 countries included in their report in 2015 (Mosler, 2015). Another reason for the rising concerns about retreating democracy in South Korea was Park Geun-hye’s response to opposing views. Despite the fact that democratic governance is based on communication and compromise, she took the approach of “either with us or against us” and expected all within government to follow her lead without questioning. For instance, when former floor leader of her own party Yoo Seung-min expressed a different view on the amendment of the National Assembly law, she labeled the move “betrayal politics” and asked voters to judge him in the next election (*Chosun Ilbo*, 2015; East Asia Forum, 2016a).

Throughout the Park Geun-hye administration, political gridlock in the South Korean National Assembly was a serious issue. She attributed the opposition parties’ objections to her policy initiatives as the main cause of the political impasse and portrayed the objections as political strife rather than legitimate differences over policy choices. However, she never tried to persuade or negotiate with the opposition party leaders to reach a compromise.

Despite these issues, Park Geun-hye consistently received relatively high job approval ratings compared to her immediate predecessors.<sup>3</sup> For example, Park Geun-hye’s initial job approval rating was 44.2%, which was not particularly high compared to her immediate predecessors, Lee Myung-bak (2008–2012) and Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2008), whose initial ratings were 52.1% and 60.3% respectively (*Hankook Ilbo*, 2016).<sup>4</sup> Yet, Lee Myung-bak’s approval rating plummeted to 21.6% four months after he came into office and Roh Moo-hyun’s rating dropped to 24.7% in his thirty-third month in office. By contrast, Park Geun-hye’s approval rating was consistently higher than 30% until it went down below 30% percent in October 2016, her forty-fifth month in office (*Hankook Ilbo*, 2016; Research and Research, 2016).<sup>5</sup> Considering her undemocratic leadership style, consistently receiving relatively high job approval ratings is rather surprising.<sup>6</sup> What led her to this type of leadership style/qualities and what made it possible to maintain that level of rating until September 2016 (forty-fourth month of her forty-six month tenure) compared to her predecessors?<sup>7</sup>

According to the presidential studies literature, it is necessary to study presidents’ personal background and political factors to understand their leadership style/qualities and public response.

Thus, we investigate President Park Geun-hye's unique personal background, lack of institutional maturity in South Korea's democratic system, and the legacy of her father, President Park Chung-hee (1961–1979). The analysis of these factors will help us better understand Park Geun-hye's leadership as well as South Korean politics and its political system.

## Previous studies on presidential leadership qualities

There is a consensus in the presidential studies literature that a presidency is not only affected by the political environment at the time, but also by the personal leadership qualities that presidents bring to and display during their terms. Nevertheless, there are no specific leadership qualities required for successful presidency as different time periods and political conditions may demand different leadership qualities (Barber, 1992; Dewan and Myatt, 2008; Edwards, 1990; Hahm and Choi, 2009; Hahm and Lee, 2008; Hargrove, 1995; Kapucu and Van Wart, 2008; Rockman, 1996).

According to Neustadt (1990: 179), presidents need three qualities to win the support of other policy-makers and the public. The first quality is the ability to persuade others using the bargaining advantages inherent in his/her position. Second is the ability to perceive the expectations of other people regarding his/her ability and to use the various advantages they think he/she has. Finally, the president needs the ability to estimate public views and to use them for his/her policy making.

Hargrove proposes two elements for presidents to become effective leaders: manipulative skills and public leadership (Hargrove, 1995). Manipulative skills include "creating bargaining coalitions, establishing authority over subordinates, keeping potential opponents off balance, ensuring alternative sources of information and advice, and making the most of the institutional levers available to win influence with other holders of power" (Hargrove, 1995: 228). Public leadership refers to the abilities to sensibly perceive policy dilemmas and the politics of policy-making to win public support. As public support for policy making in a modern democratic society is critical, public leadership is important to become a successful president (Hargrove, 1995; Tucker, 1995).

On the other hand, Greenstein (2000: 217–222) argues that there are six different qualities presidents need for successful leadership: (1) effectiveness as a public communicator; (2) organizational capacity; (3) political skills; (4) vision; (5) cognitive style and strategic intelligence; and (6) emotional intelligence. These qualities are related to each other in pairs. Public communication may be the external face of leadership whereas organizational capacity is the inner face. Political skill would not be any good without a good vision. Cognitive style and emotional intelligence are intervening factors that affect other qualities.

Although previous studies introduced various leadership qualities for presidential success, there are considerable overlaps. Neustadt, Hargrove, and Greenstein all emphasize the importance of effective communication (Neustadt's perceiving public view and ability to persuade others; Hargrove's public leadership; and Greenstein's effective communicator) and the ability to negotiate with the opposition leaders (Neustadt's ability to perceive other's expectations and persuade them; Hargrove's manipulative skill; and Greenstein's political skill). In addition, Hargrove and Greenstein note the importance of a good team of presidential staff and cabinet members (Greenstein, 2000; Hargrove, 1995).

In other words, three commonly noted leadership qualities are required to become a successful leader, and these three elements are also used to analyze and assess presidencies :

First, effective communication with the public is a necessary condition for any president to be successful in a modern democratic system because a president's eloquent articulation of policy initiatives shows his/her abilities, efforts, and experience. Moreover, modern technology forces politics to be exposed to the public, and public opinion considerably influences policy decision-making (Burstein, 2003; Cohen, 2015; Page and Shapiro, 1983).

Second, according to Neustadt (1990), political skill is a central ability for presidential performance because in the presidential system, the government is often divided to maintain checks and balances. If the president's party enjoys a majority in the legislature, the president can dominate in governing. But if the opposition party enjoys a majority in the legislature, political impasse can occur because of the divided government. To prevent political gridlock and to help the government function, how presidents use his/her power to build public support, make public policies and implement them, and build a reputation among policymakers as an effective political operator by making good political deals are the keys to success (Greenstein, 2000: 219).

Third, organizational capacity includes two ingredients: (1) the president's ability to form a team that will work together effectively; and (2) the ability to build effective institutional arrangements. Forming a team involves recruiting good staff members who will provide expert views instead of being deferential, and building a team of cabinet members that is operational with diverse specialties (Greenstein, 2000: 218). Accordingly, Helco (1999: 32) argues that the president must manage the presidential office, which is something between administering in detail and merely presiding in general. Arnold (1986: 363) also asserts that managerial concerns are essential to the president's ability to transform ideas and commitments into policies. As a result, management is critical to political leadership (Pfiffner, 2007: 6). Combining all these, to become a successful president, he/she needs a team of experts that will provide support instead of telling the president what he/she wants to hear. In other words, good team building is crucially important for a president to become effective.

### Park Geun-hye's leadership styles/qualities

We apply these three commonly noted leadership qualities to assess President Park Geun-hye's leadership style/qualities. What qualities a president possesses are debatable, but there is a general consensus that President Park Geun-hye was not an effective public communicator (Suk, 2015). She was the first president who did not hold a single press conference in her first year. Her predecessors President Kim Young-sam (1993–1998) held press conferences three times in his first year, Kim Dae-jung (1998–2003) eight times, Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2008) eleven times, and Lee Myung-bak (2008–2013) four times (JTBC, 2016). As of September 2016, President Park Geun-hye had held five press conferences while Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun held 150 of these events respectively, and Lee Myung-bak 20 of these while they were in office (Hankyoreh, 2016a).

Not only did she avoid press conferences, but she also eschewed issuing public statements to the nation, although previous presidents often used this method to explain their policy initiatives and/or certain political and economic issues. For example, President Kim Young-sam released a statement to the nation twenty times while in office, Kim Dae-jung ten times, Roh Moo-hyun nine times, and Lee Myung-bak four times. But, Park Geun-hye only did this on five occasions. Although Lee Myung-bak issued only four statements to the nation, he communicated with the public through bi-weekly radio or internet addresses, which totaled 109 times. Due to the lack of communication, President Park Geun-hye received the nicknames "muk-tong" or "bool-tong," meaning no communication.

Her lack of communication was in part responsible for the ruling Saenuri Party's recent defeat in the congressional election in April 2016 (JoongAng Daily, 2016a). Yet, despite this recent general election defeat, President Park Geun-hye's authoritative, top-down leadership remained unchanged and she blamed the opposition party's lack of cooperation. Instead of negotiating with opposition party leaders, she has requested public support for her reform drive to override the opposition.

Turning to her political skills, gridlock was the key word describing the relationship between the Park Geun-hye administration and the opposition parties. Many policy initiatives by President Park were stalled in the National Assembly. But there was little effort to resolve the issue, although previous presidents met with the opposition party leaders to settle their political differences. For instance, President Kim Young-sam met with the opposition party leader ten times during his tenure, Kim Dae-jung eight times, Roh Moo-hyun twice, and Lee Myung-bak three times while they were in office, but Park Geun-hye met with the opposition party leader only once shortly after her inauguration (*Hankyoreh*, 2016b). In other words, she did not meet with the opposition party leaders after her presidency's honeymoon period.

Furthermore, President Park Geun-hye disregarded the objection of the opposition parties to cabinet appointments. Since the hearing system for cabinet appointments was adopted in 2005, there were 25 cases where the president made an appointment despite the objection of the opposition parties.<sup>8</sup> As of September 2016, President Park Geun-hye had disregarded the objections of the opposition parties eleven times. According to National Assembly Secretariat's Korean Serials, President Roh Moo-hyun did that three times and President Lee Myung-bak eleven times (Lee, 2016). To make matters worse, in September 2016, the opposition parties passed a resolution to dismiss a cabinet member in the National Assembly against the ruling party's wish, but President Park Geun-hye vetoed it, resulting in a political impasse (*Korea Herald*, 2016). It was the first presidential veto against a National Assembly recommendation to sack a cabinet member since 1987, when the Constitution was last revised.

In terms of building a team of staff and a cabinet, Park Geun-hye received heavy criticism. According to Rockman (1996: 338), governing involves making choices that will inevitably define the president. Given the mismatch among expectations for presidential performance, presidential authority, and institutional capacity, presidents have a strong incentive to enhance their capacity by appointing his/her close aides to senior administrative positions (Lowi, 1985; Moe, 1985; Weingast, 2005). The executive positions require decision-making and management abilities. Thus, these political appointees can change policies, and their management abilities substantially affect policy outcomes as well.

Thus, it is difficult to take up the issue with the president for filling government posts with his/her close aides, and Park Geun-hye is not the first president to reward loyalty with important government positions. But cronyism in the appointment of major government posts in the Park Geun-hye administration seemed to be worse than in previous administrations. From the beginning, Park Geun-hye's nominations for cabinet positions came under fire and had to change multiple times, which delayed forming her administration. The main critique focused on her nominating the friends of her former and/or current aides.

Due to the critique of her personnel appointments, in 2014 Park Geun-hye established the Ministry of Personnel Management to reform the existing personnel administration process. With the ministry, she attempted to reform by allowing private experts to take important government posts, experimenting with a merit system by abolishing the existing seniority basis and introducing competition among officials with corresponding rewards and punishments. She also emphasized expertise and integrity as key factors in selecting government officials.

However, Park Geun-hye's reform efforts turned out largely fruitless because the new practice was used as an outlet for parachuting unqualified persons to publicly owned corporations as a reward for political loyalty. A good example was the appointment of Hong Ky-tack as the Vice-President of the China-led Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). He was an economics professor at Chung-Ang University and had no banking experience. But Park Geun-hye appointed him Chairman of the Korea Development Bank and later Vice-President of AIIB. Since he resigned from the post without a good reason after being implicated in a fraud scandal over cooked books at



Daewoo Shipbuilding and Marine Engineering, South Korea lost its voice in the bank, which is clearly a personnel management failure (*JoongAng Daily*, 2016b). Since Hong Ky-tack was an alumnus of Park Geun-hye's alma mater Sogang University, his appointment based on school ties was strongly suspected.<sup>9</sup>

Ineffective personnel administration has also resulted in poor management of crises. In May 2014, the Sewol ferry sank, resulting in 304 deaths. The Park Geun-hye administration came under heavy criticism because the government's inadequate response incurred unnecessarily large casualties. Her administration's poor crisis management did not end there. In June 2015, there was an unprecedented outbreak of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). Effective leadership during the crisis, recognizing the urgency of the situation, and adequate personnel management could have reduced the damage. However, the government's inadequate response considerably worsened the situation. As a result, public distrust of her leadership substantially increased.

In addition to the ineffective personnel management, President Park Geun-hye was also described as an imperious leader in terms of her relationship with cabinet members. Public photos often showed ministers and presidential staff members reverentially taking notes while she was speaking, which some critics liken to North Korean generals trailing their young leader Kim Jong-un with note pads (*New York Times*, 2015). In addition, Park Geun-hye eschewed deliberation, and there seemed to be no systematic policy development process. She gave no indication of her intentions, nor did she empower anyone on her staff (*JoongAng Daily*, 2016c). Park Geun-hye's unwillingness to delegate power by placing someone in charge of certain tasks with accountability added a further burden on her often delaying important decisions.

Overall, Park Geun-hye's management style was marked by secrecy and top-down control. Her policy priorities have been in secret, and the Blue House staff and the president's political appointees had tight control over the executive branch. In fact, Park Geun-hye demanded loyalty from most of her immediate subordinates and advisors. To make matters worse, there was a series of political scandals involving the Blue House aides who were involved in influence-peddling cases, which undermined her credibility.

Next, we analyze the factors that contributed to President Park Geun-hye's leadership style/qualities.

## Park Geun-hye's unique personal background

Park Geun-hye was born in February 1952. When she was nine years old, her father Major General Park Chung-hee seized power through the 16 May military coup d'état in 1961. He stayed in power for 18 years, which means Park Geun-hye spent most of her childhood and early adult life in South Korea's presidential mansion, the Blue House. After her mother Yook Young-soo was assassinated in 1974, Park Geun-hye even served as the de facto first lady at official events (Ha, 2013; Koo, 2001). In other words, Park Geun-hye was raised like a royal family member and received a great deal of first-hand experience in politics.

In 1979 Park Chung-hee was assassinated and after that incident, Park Geun-hye disappeared from the public eye. After her father's death, she secluded herself in her home for almost 18 years before she entered politics. Her father's death left deep scars as well as tremendous sorrow because few people offered help although she was only 27 years old and had to take care of her two younger siblings. Considering she lived as a member of the first family for 18 years, it must have been extremely difficult for her to make an adjustment to this new life style (Ha, 2013).

These sudden changes, according to Lee, gave Park Geun-hye a betrayal trauma as her father was assassinated by his right-hand man Kim Jae-kyu, Director of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency, and many people who were close to her family while Park Chung-hee was in power turned

their back on her after the death of her father (*New York Times*, 2015). Concerning her experience during that time period, Park Geun-hye wrote in her memoir, *Despair Strengthens Me and Hope Moves Me*, that many people she relied on betrayed her after her father's death (Lee, 2016).

While former military generals Chun Doo-hwan (1980–1988) and Roh Tae-woo (1988–1993) were in power, Park Geun-hye was completely out of the public view. However, the transition to democracy in South Korea significantly raised her political value for three reasons: (1) in a democratic system, political leaders are elected and politicians need votes to win offices; (2) the South Korean economy experienced a financial crisis in 1997 and due to economic hardship, Park Chung-hee was re-evaluated and missed particularly by the older generation; (3) thanks to his role in South Korea's economic development, Park Chung-hee was highly admired in his home region Gyeongsang province and rural areas. To take advantage of Park Chung-hee's legacy, the Grand National Party (GNP) presidential candidate Lee Hoi-chang invited Park Geun-hye to join the party in 1997. Accepting the invitation, she got into politics, reappearing in the public eye.

Luckily for Park Geun-hye, there was a by-election in Daegu in 1998. Daegu was practically her father's hometown and thus she easily won the election and became a lawmaker. Six years later, a golden opportunity for Park Geun-hye came up. The GNP party leader Choi Byong-ryeol stepped down because of the GNP's illegal campaign funds scandal. Moreover, the GNP's attempt to impeach President Roh Moo-hyun caused significant backlash from the public in 2004. Public support for the party plummeted and the GNP needed a fresh face for a reliever role for the upcoming election (Ha, 2013).

Due to the 1997 financial crisis and the lingering economic difficulties, many people missed Park Chung-hee despite his authoritarian rule and human rights abuses. She quickly emerged as a darling figure of conservative South Koreans who hankered for the charismatic leadership associated with her father. In addition, Park Geun-hye claimed that she never married because she "married the nation," creating a patriotic image. Accordingly, Park Geun-hye became an excellent candidate for the new party leader. In 2004, only six years after she got into politics, Park Geun-hye became the GNP party leader. She was expected to play the role temporarily due to her lack of political experience, but she stayed in the position until she resigned from the post to run for the party's presidential nomination in 2006 (Lim et al., 2015).

In 2007, Lee Myung-bak defeated Park Geun-hye in the GNP's presidential nomination competition. Park Geun-hye received more votes from the GNP party members and the party's nomination electoral college, but she lost because of public opinion survey results. Thus, there was a controversy about the fairness of the nomination procedure. Yet, Park Geun-hye publicly conceded to Lee Myung-bak, setting a good precedent. In the presidential election Lee Myung-bak defeated the Uri Party candidate Jeong Dong-young to become the seventeenth president.

Shortly after Lee Myung-bak came to office, Park Geun-hye and Lee Myung-bak clashed because a large number of lawmakers who belonged to "the Park faction" did not receive the party nomination for the 2008 general election. Park Geun-hye protested and criticized the nomination committee because the party nomination was not fair nor consistent due to the lack of clear criteria.

Friction between Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye further worsened when the Lee Myung-bak administration announced its intention to revisit the plan of Sejoing City in order to make changes. The Sejong City plan began when President Roh Moo-hyun, as a presidential candidate, had made a campaign pledge that he would move the capital city from Seoul to Chungcheong province if he was elected. In December 2003, with the GNP's consent along with Park Geun-hye's support, the South Korean National Assembly passed a law to create a new capital city in Chungcheong province. However, in October 2004 the Constitutional Court ruled that moving the capital city without a constitutional amendment is illegal because there is a conventional law that



Seoul is South Korea's capital city. As a result, the Roh Moo-hyun administration came up with a new plan of creating a multifunctional administrative city and moving some government departments there. The new city was later named Sejong City.

After Lee Myung-bak came to office, he opposed the plan. His rationale for the objection was that moving some government functions to Sejong City would significantly reduce the efficiency and effectiveness of the government. The opposition party insisted on sticking to the plan and Park Geun-hye openly agreed with the opposition party rather than the president by claiming that the plan for creating Sejoing City was a pledge to the South Korean people. Eventually, the Lee Myung-bak administration's attempt to rescind the Sejong City plan failed and Sejong City was created as planned. Throughout Lee Myung-bak's tenure, Park Geun-hye continuously had issues with Lee Myung-bak and the two showed few signs of cooperation.

In Park Geun-hye's political career, there was a noticeable achievement. Park Geun-hye led elections as the party leader of the opposition Grand National Party in 2004 and the ruling Saenuri Party (new name for GNP) in 2012. Her party performed well in 2004<sup>10</sup> and won the majority in 2012. Thanks to the victory in both elections, she was given the nick name "queen of elections." Her political capital significantly increased because of the role she played in these elections, which included remaking the party's policies and programs, leadership, and electoral strategies.

Her unique personal background discussed thus far sheds light on her leadership style/qualities. Throughout her political career, Park Geun-hye was consistent. She stuck to her principles, keeping political pledges and not compromising with other views. As a result, she was considered one of the few politicians who was trustworthy and had integrity. Thus, sustaining her political ethos of consistency and determination increased her popularity among voters, which contributed to her success in elections.

According to Fukuyama (2006: 60–61), the leadership quality of putting aside self-doubt and listening only to the inner voice that tells you what the right thing to do is good for leadership. In other words, Park Geun-hye's leadership qualities may not necessarily have been bad. Moreover, the anecdotal story that Park Geun-hye had asked whether there was any unusual movement by North Korea when she heard of her father's death had helped her build an image as a strong leader who could keep a clear head in a crisis (*New York Times*, 2015).

However, the same leadership quality can also be problematic as steely determination can become stubbornness and the inner voice can become delusional (Fukuyama, 2006). Park Geun-hye's strength as a political leader included consistent adherence to her policies. Yet, she was not willing to admit the complexity of many policy issues. She also had a tendency to consider only a narrow range of alternatives, a similar cognitive style to US President Jimmy Carter who often viewed issues through a simplifying prism (Pfiffner, 2007: 17). Accordingly, Park Geun-hye's strength as a political leader was also her weaknesses, which is the so-called "dual nature of leadership style" (Fukuyama, 2006; Pfiffner, 2007).

In this regard, critics and political analysts trace Park Geun-hye's rather "undemocratic" leadership style/qualities to her unique personal background as she grew up watching her father ruling the country. Although President Park Chung-hee led South Korea's miraculous economic development, in fact, he did not tolerate political opposition. Moreover, freedom of speech and freedom of the press were strictly restrained. He was indeed an authoritarian leader, expecting others to follow his lead instead of tolerating different views. According to Kee-seok Kim, Park Geun-hye, like her father, seems to have had no tolerance for different views or opposition to her policies (East Asia Forum, 2016b).

Indeed, the same quality seemed to prevent her from communicating with other leaders and dealing with different views after she became president. Expressing her opinion on political issues and staying with it as a politician is a part of public discussion, not a policy decision, but making

policy decisions as president without deliberation can be seriously problematic because policy discussions are skipped in the policymaking process. In other words, her mind-set remained stuck in her father's days, steeped in a hierarchical and closed form of leadership. Thus, her political strengths (the positive side) were inextricably linked to her leadership limitations (the negative side), making her leadership qualities a "double-edged sword" (McAdams, 2016).

### **Lack of institutional maturity: Legacy of strong presidential power**

Park Geun-hye's leadership style/qualities seemed to be largely undemocratic although South Korea has maintained a democratic system for almost 30 years. What made it possible for her to exercise her rather non-democratic leadership qualities? We argue that it was possible because South Korea does not have mature democratic institutions while power is concentrated in the president. According to Diamond (1999), in order for a democratic system to be functional and stable, all political actors and citizens must respect democratic norms and values, and behave accordingly. Democracy must be the only game in town (Linz and Stepan, 1996). To this end, democratic institutions and the rule of law must not be challenged (O'Donnell, 1996).

However, democratic institutions have been repeatedly challenged in South Korea due to its political culture and the legacy of authoritarian rule and military dictatorship (Hahm et al., 2013; Heo and Hahm, 2015; Im, 2000; Sin, 1999). South Korea's political culture is based on Confucianism, which values hierarchy so that institutionalization of democratic systems and the adoption of democratic culture have been slow. Moreover, South Korea has a long history of using violence to fight against authoritarian government, which impeded democratic institutionalization and the rule of law. For example, the fact that the number of disturbances in the courts for 2012–2016 totaled 140 shows the lack of respect for the rule of law (*Kookmin Ilbo*, 2016).

With the lack of mature democratic institutions, the legacy of a strong presidential system further complicates democratic maturation. Although South Korea's presidential power was substantially weakened compared to the authoritarian period since the transition to democracy in 1987, the structural remnants of a strong presidential system still leave significant power to the president without sufficient political checks.

The origin of strong presidential power goes all the way back to the establishment of the Republic of Korea after World War II. With the liberation from Japanese colonial rule in 1945, the South Korean government was established in 1948 with a presidential system that concentrated power in the presidency. Rhee Syngman (1948–1960) was the first president and at that time, the presidential term of office was four years with two term limits. However, President Rhee Syngman abused his power and successfully pushed a constitutional amendment in 1952 to eliminate the term limit. To stay in power, he also engaged in election fraud, which led to massive protests. In 1960, he was forced to step down and went into exile in Hawaii.

Since the presidential system resulted in the abuse of power and authoritarian rule, a parliamentary system was adopted for the following administration. Yet, the parliamentary system did not work well and South Korea was politically unstable due to frequent protests and factional fights within the governing party. In 1961, Major General Park Chung-hee came to power through a military coup and reinstated the presidential system. Since then, South Korea has maintained various forms of presidential system.

Due to the lack of political legitimacy, Park Chung-hee focused on economic development. In order to transform an agrarian society to an industrialized state, he relied on economic technocrats. As a result, he crafted a strong bureaucracy. To push his policy initiatives, he also strengthened presidential power, which gave way to the emergence of an authoritarian presidential system.

President Park Chung-hee stayed in power for 18 years until he was assassinated by his close aide in 1979. Most South Korean people expected a democracy to follow, but Chun Doo-hwan came (1987–1988) to power through another military coup. His presidency was similar to President Park Chung-hee's, another authoritarian regime. This long-lasting experience of strong presidential systems left power concentrated in the president even after the transition to democracy in 1987.

Under Presidents Park Chung-hee (1961–1979) and Chun Doo-hwan (1980–1988), there was a strong “principal–agent” relationship between the president and the bureaucracy due to the president's long tenure (Hahm and Plein, 1995, 1997). This continuity created considerable stability in policy making by leading the bureaucracy to engage in long-term and consistent planning on policy affairs without the fear of sudden or unexpected policy shifts. Bureaucratic loyalty to the president granted extensive administrative discretion and provided a basis for job security and professional advancement. In this regard, there have been positive impacts of the executive-bureaucrat nexus on economic development. Accordingly, authoritarian leadership led to a strong presidential system in South Korea (Ginsburg, 2002; Hahm, 2002; Hahm and Plein, 1995; 1997; Jung et al., 2016).

Economic development led to the transition to democracy in 1987. Significant changes in the presidential system followed. During the authoritarian regimes, the president's tenure was uncertain, meaning there was no lame duck. However, the constitutional amendment that limited the president's tenure to a single five-year fixed term considerably reduced presidential power on economic and social actors as well as the bureaucrats as the change modified bureaucratic and other social actors' perception of reward and loyalty. As a result, turf battles among government agencies and disputes among private-sector social and business leaders began to occur. Moreover, bureaucrats considered presidential policy initiatives as temporary political actions. Thus, those who had long-term career ambitions tended not to dedicate themselves to presidential policy initiatives (Baum, 2011; Hahm et al., 2013, 2014; Lee, 2001; Lee et al., 2010).

At the same time, the South Korean National Assembly has changed with democratization. In 2012, the National Assembly made significant changes by passing two laws that fortified the minority party's veto power. One of the new laws substantially enhanced the power of minority party members in committees. According to the law, once the ruling and opposition parties at the subcommittee level agree to define a bill as “contentious,” a two-thirds vote is required to pass the bill in the committee and send it to the National Assembly floor. Another change concerns filibuster. Under the new law, three-fifths of the total lawmakers must support ending the filibuster (Park, 2013).<sup>11</sup>

Due to these changes, Park Geun-hye needed to understand that the president cannot command other political actors in the policy-making process. To pass laws, she and her party leaders needed to negotiate with the opposition party leaders requiring a greater willingness to compromise. In other words, she should have played the role of “broker” rather than “commander” (Hahm and Plein, 1995, 1997). However, she still seemed to see the president as a powerful leader, a vestige of the authoritarian times. As a result, political gridlock in the National Assembly continued after Park Geun-hye came to office and the public lost confidence in the National Assembly.

Despite the “malfunctioning” National Assembly, President Park Geun-hye did not seem to feel the need to negotiate thanks to the power concentration in the presidency. For example, although President Park Geun-hye ignored the opposition party's request to dismiss a cabinet member or not to appoint certain nominees for cabinet posts, there was not much the opposition parties could do. Even if President Park Geun-hye did not meet with the opposition party leaders, there was no harm to her as there are no institutional rules or regulations that affect presidential power and a certain group of people provided unconditional support for her. Who provided that kind of support and why? We argue that she got that kind of support thanks to her father Park Chung-hee's legacy.

## Park Chung-hee's legacy

When Park Chung-hee came to power through a military coup in 1961, South Korea was very poor. The economy was decrepit, and South Korea's GDP per capita was merely \$82. The illiteracy rate of the population was almost 28% (National Archives, 2016; Seol, 2010). To make up for his lack of political legitimacy and to improve national security, Park Chung-hee focused on economic development. His logic behind this move was that economic growth was crucial for South Korea's security. He also wanted to lessen South Korea's dependence on U.S. economic aid to reduce Washington's influence on South Korea's policy making.

However, South Korea had virtually no natural resources while it has a large population. There was no capital or advanced technologies. To cope with the condition, the Park Chung-hee administration employed the government-led development paradigm and export-oriented industrialization approach. To this end, the priority of government expenditure was on the improvement of social and economic infrastructure as it is the foundation of the economy. Throughout the Park Chung-hee administration, approximately one third of gross domestic investment went into infrastructure improvement (Kim, 1990; Koo, 1991).

Furthermore, under the slogan of *suchul ipguk* (nation building through exports), the Park administration promoted exports. To this end, the Park government purchased bank stocks to publicly own the main banks. Then, the government gave preferential credit allocation to the firms based on their export orientation. In addition, the government set export targets, provided support for export businesses (e.g. tax reduction), and assisted international marketing through the Korean Trade Promotion Corporation, which was established in 1962 (Rhee et al., 1984).

Government ownership of the main banks made it easier to support export through economic policies for three reasons. First, the government was able to maintain the weak Korean Won, which helped export. Second, the government set high interest rates to induce domestic savings. Increased savings enabled greater investment. Finally, to get more credit allocation, more firms became interested in export. Since South Korea had little foreign exchange, export was critical for economic stability.

However, the only comparative advantage of South Korea at the time was cheap quality labor. Thus, the Park administration started with labor-intensive light industrial goods, such as textiles, toys, and shoes. At the same time, Park wanted to obtain advanced technologies. Thus, he established and supported the Korean Institute for Science and Technology. Once South Korea became self-sufficient with light industrial goods, the Park administration adopted the Heavy Chemical Industrialization policy in the 1970s and began to promote capital-intensive exports instead of labor-intensive light industrial goods (Cha, 2002). With these policies, South Korea's annual average increase of exports reached 37.5% between 1962 and 1980, and the South Korean economy enjoyed annual growth rates of 8% to 10% during the Park Chung-hee administration (Heo and Roehrig, 2010). When Park Chung-hee was assassinated in 1979, South Korea's per capita gross national product reached \$1,640, which is approximately 20 times more than the 1961 level (World Bank). Since Park Chung-hee is responsible for South Korea's miraculous economic success, he is one of the most respected Korean leaders despite his authoritarian rule.

Since the economic foundation was strong, even after the death of Park Chung-hee, South Korea continued enjoying rapid growth until the mid-1990s. In 1997, however, a financial crisis broke out and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailed out South Korea. Due to the IMF's requirement of tight fiscal policy, interest rates soared. Small and medium size enterprises had difficulties in accessing credit allocation, and bankruptcy rose steeply. Unemployment skyrocketed, and South Korea experienced a negative growth. Economic hardship led to high rates of suicide. Witnessing these difficulties, the older generation that experienced high growth under Park Chung-hee's leadership began to miss him.

Slow economic growth since the financial crisis in 1997 continued, and South Korea has had only 2-4 percent of economic growth since then. To change the pattern of slow growth, the Park Geun-hye administration employed an ambitious policy initiative, the so-called “creative economy,” to modernize industries, create jobs, and boost domestic demand (Cha, 2015). However, her major policy initiatives on economic and social reform were largely unsuccessful. Growth rates remain below 3% for the past three and a half years, showing no signs of change. Although the South Korean president was not solely responsible for economic performance and quite often had only minimal influence over changes in fiscal and monetary policies, the public attributed the poor economic performance to Park Geun-hye.

However, her job approval rating was consistently over 30% percent until September 2016 (the forty-fourth month of her 49-month tenure). Potential reasons include incompetent opposition parties, newly established conservative TV channels, the embedded dominance of conservatism due to the North Korean security threat, and the support of the older generation. Among them, older generation support thanks to Park Chung-hee’s legacy was the most important reason as South Korea’s population is aging. According to surveys, Park Chung-hee was repeatedly named as the most respected president in South Korean history (Gallup Korea, 2004–2014; *Segye Ilbo*, 2009). With conservative senior citizens becoming a larger share of the population, Park Geun-hye consistently received support from the older generation thanks to the nostalgia for her father.

## Conclusion and discussion

When Park Geun-hye was elected South Korea’s first female president in 2012, many expected that South Korea’s democracy would deepen. On the contrary, Park Geun-hye led to growing concerns about her leadership and deteriorating democracy in South Korea. After four years in the office, she was impeached and ousted. In this paper, we applied the three commonly noted leadership qualities—effective communication, political skill, and organizational capacity—suggested by presidential study scholars to assess President Park Geun-hye’s leadership style/qualities, which indicate that Park Geun-hye lacked the commonly required leadership qualities for a successful president. Nevertheless, Park Geun-hye had done better than her immediate predecessors Lee Myung-bak and Roh Moo-hyun in terms of job approval ratings. Thus, in this study, we analyzed what led to her leadership qualities and what made it possible for her to maintain that level of job approval rating.

The contribution of this study is threefold: 1) application of leadership qualities recommended for successful leadership to the Park Geun-hye case for analysis; and 2) analyzing the sources of Park Geun-hye’s leadership style; and 3) examining what made it possible for her to maintain relatively high approval ratings despite her rather poor leadership qualities.

Park Geun-hye was a strong political leader; she had what Fukuyama (2006) regards as the strengths of great leadership. The problem is that bad leadership can also flow from the same characteristics, particularly in a democracy. In other words, what we once praised as her greatest strengths turned out to be her biggest weaknesses during her tenure. Her lack of communication with opposition leaders and inability to consider different views resulted in political impasse and non-democratic governance, which raised concerns about South Korea’s democratic retreat. Moreover, the Park Geun-hye administration’s mishandling of crises was largely considered the result of poor personnel management. In other words, she did not show the leadership qualities commonly suggested in the literature for a successful presidency.

We argue that her leadership style/qualities came from her unique personal background. She grew up watching her father Park Chung-hee who was an authoritarian leader but achieved miraculous economic development. Park Chung-hee was able to do this because South Korea did not



have a democratic system and a majority of the population enjoyed the benefits of economic development.

However, Park Geun-hye was elected in a democratic system. In a democracy, political cooperation and negotiation are required. Moreover, Park Geun-hye's reform efforts for economic growth were not successful. President Park Geun-hye seems to be a conspicuous example of a great woman with the right motives in the wrong place, at the wrong time, who was not able to communicate with others, as Traub (2016) noted for U.S. President John Quincy Adams.

Despite all the issues Park Geun-hye had, what made it possible for her to receive higher than 30% job approval ratings during most of her tenure? When social and economic conditions are difficult, people seek a great president who can lead the nation out of these difficulties, which is a type of "Messianism." Due to long-lasting economic difficulties and slow growth, many South Koreans hoped to have a great president who could develop the economy just like Park Chung-hee did. Accordingly, the older generation that experienced rapid economic growth under the Park Chung-hee administration was nostalgic for his leadership, which we argue was the reason for unconditional support for Park Geun-hye.

Although the impeachment of Park Geun-hye is an unfortunate part of South Korean history, it is a clear evidence of South Korea's maturing democracy. During the impeachment process at the National Assembly and the Constitutional Court, many people took to the streets either to support or oppose the impeachment. Yet, non-violent protests and candlelight vigils showed the level of South Korea's civiness and people's understanding of democracy. Thus, the political instability caused by the impeachment of Park Geun-hye is part of the growing pains of South Korea's political development.

That said, repeated presidential failures after democratization in 1987 may have a harmful effect on South Korea's political development due to increasing public distrust of the presidency. The public may blame presidential leadership for the lackluster performance of the economy and political gridlock in the legislature. As a result, political development in South Korea may come slowly.

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## Notes

1. Choi Soon-sil is the daughter of Park Geun-hye's mentor Choi Tae-min and ex-wife of Park Geun-hye's former aide Chung Yoon-hoi, who was alleged to have earlier influence on Park Geun-hye.
2. Freedom House downgraded South Korea's freedom of speech from "free" to "partly free" in 2011, at the end of the President Lee Myung-bak period.
3. Since South Korea transitioned to democracy in 1987, there have been six presidents (Roh Tae-woo, Kim Young-sam, Kim Dae-jung, Lee Myung-bak, Roh Moo-hyun, and Park Geun-hye). All of them experienced decline of approval ratings over time, which dropped to below 30% except for Kim Dae-jung. Yet, Kim Dae-jung's case was exceptional as the country was going through the economic recovery process following the 1997 financial crisis. Moreover, Kim Young-sam and Kim Dae-jung enjoyed exceptional popularity due to their roles in the democratization process. In other words, Kim Dae-jung's case was exceptional.
4. Kim Dae-jung's (1998–2003) and Kim Young-sam's (1993–1998) initial ratings were 71.3% and 71.1% respectively.
5. Park Geun-hye's weekly ratings went down below 30% twice: 1) in the third week of June 2015 after the outbreak of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS); and 2) in the third week of April 2016 after the ruling party's crushing defeat in general elections.



6. Park Geun-hye's approval plummeted after "Choi Soon-sil gate" broke out and dropped to 4% in December 2016. Since the objective of our paper is analyzing what made it possible for President Park to receive relatively high approval despite her undemocratic leadership style and "Choi-Soon-sil gate" was an exceptional political scandal that led to the impeachment, we exclude the period after the scandal broke out.
7. Although Park Geun-hye was ousted from the presidential mansion, the Blue House, 49 months after her election as president, the National Assembly passed her impeachment in the forty-sixth month of her presidency and her role as a president stopped at that time.
8. South Korea transitioned to democracy in 1987. However, the National Assembly did not adopt a measure to check the president's authority to appoint the prime minister until 2000, and cabinet members until 2005. The personnel hearing system was adopted to verify that the candidate has the ability to perform as a senior government official. Yet, it does not require the consent of the National Assembly, except in the appointment of Prime Minister, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Chairman of the Board of Audit and Inspection, President of the Constitutional Court, and Supreme Court Justices.
9. Another example is the appointment of Kang Myun-wook, former chief executive officer of Meritz Asset Management, as the chief investment officer of the National Pension Service in February 2016, South Korea's largest institutional investor that handles over 500 trillion won (\$405 billion). Since he had no prior experience of fund management, his appointment raised many eyebrows. Considering that President Park Geun-hye's economic counselor Ahn Chong-bum and Kang Myun-wook went to the same high school and college, political connections through school ties was strongly suspected (*JoongAng Daily*, 2016b).
10. The GNP was facing a severe defeat in the 2004 congressional election due to the failed attempt to impeach President Roh Moo-hyun and the bribery scandal of its 2002 presidential candidate, Lee Hoi-chang (revealed in 2004). Park Geun-hye was appointed as the chairwoman of the GNP party and led the election efforts. In the election, the GNP lost its majority position, but managed to gain 121 seats, which is largely considered a great achievement under such inhospitable circumstances for the party. As the chairwoman of the GNP, Park Geun-hye also helped her party make significant gains in the local election in 2006.
11. Unlike in the United States, the South Korean president may propose a legislative bill to the National Assembly.

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