

Beyond a social fever



CHINTITO SINCE 1995
NIZAMUDDIN AHMED

ELECTIONS are a fascinating spectacle, to say the least, and this is not in reference to any tax dodging on a massive scale, deleted emails of humongous volume, amazing tales of surreptitious groping (the 'victims' fading into silence after being overrun by the electoral college), a greenhorn candidate upending a seasoned politician, and strange bedfellows beyond one's border. For in the end all that matters is whether voters believe in an agenda that the winning candidate is likely to fulfil. But, there seems to be no end to the controversies in a truly bitter build-up with allegations being rife that a little digital assistance was provided by sworn enemies.

The drama is no less spectacular in balloting held to select office-bearers of even non-political entities in our society. There may be logic in the contention that many such elections are a squandering of money that could be better utilised, a sheer waste of time and full of lies. One may reflect on the price that we have to pay to uphold democracy.

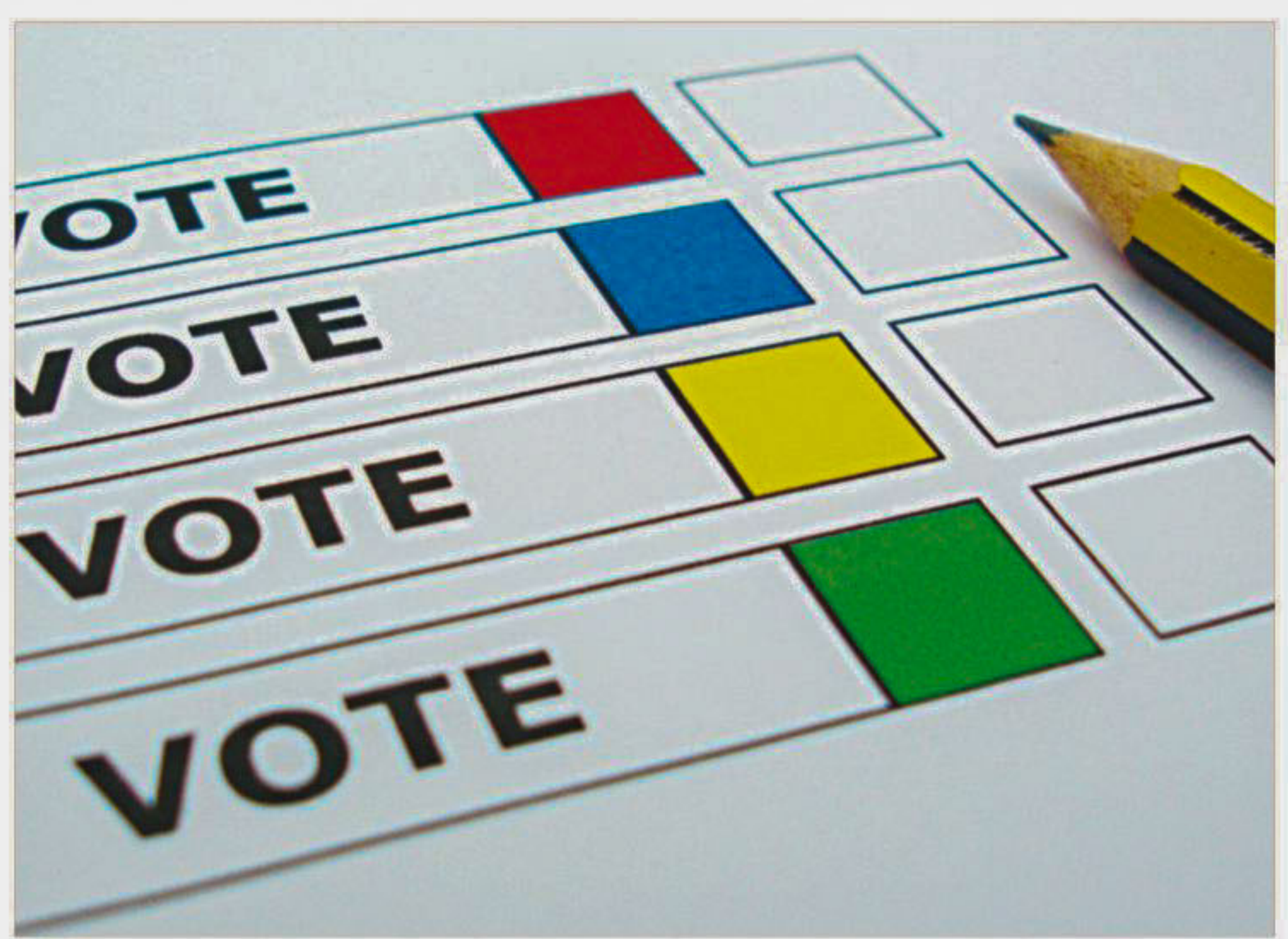
People hold contrasting opinions about elections; they are either a most wonderful *mela* or a disgusting *tamasha*, depending usually upon the outcome. For the rest of us it is fabulous entertainment with no request for repeat performance.

A candidate calling for extra security before the elections finds no need for such measures after a favourable mandate, speechifying that people are the 'source of all power'. You may dispute if you are languishing from scarcity of electricity in your workplace and/or residence. The victor will declare at a victory rally that everything, from security to attendance, was perfect, that many belonging to even the

opposition camp voted for him because they disliked the latest haircut of his opponent.

On the other hand, the defeated candidates see huge holes in the 'engineering' and, in spite of socio-political rivalry and monetary disparity among them, they feel collectively cheated. They are certain that on a more level playing field they could score more goals. A few are certain of victory, if only the Election Commissioner was not standing under the goalpost. They are confident of a reversal of the results even if the number of votes needs to swing by tens of thousands.

At the voter's end, a matter of great irritation (pain is a better word) for me, and dare I say I speak for most of you, is the seemingly endless series of text messages that often are delivered with a tinkle way deep into the night. (Why should I silent mode my mobile for fear of predators in the garb of good Samaritans? An emergency could always turn up.) SMS after SMS outlining the candidates' angelic character and superlative ambitions (for your sake, mind you) make voters wonder in the wee hours of dawn whether an



the very strategy of electioneering, especially in clubs, associations, and trade organisations. The poster with the matinee look adds a touch of personality. The constant flow of 'likes' and comments remind you that you had indeed befriended the candidate or his friend or his friend's friends; they can all tag you. Perhaps you have never really thanked FB for the tremendous network of F&F and acquaintances and the unmet that it helps to build, yet the 'untag' option will make you feel tremendously gratified.

The final nail that might make you decide not to vote at all is a letter by postal service; no prizes for guessing from who. On it is glued your name and address, including the membership number of the organisation/club from which the desperate tick-seeker has gleaned the location of your abode/office. The same four-colour poster is now printed on A4. You wonder whether a guy is worth your nod if he needs telling you in all possible forms of media that he should be elected. That is when you decide to book a ticket to stay outside your station on the D-day.

In case you want to practice your democratic right, the final encounter will take place just outside the booths where candidates will extend their hand. Shake them if only to disguise your intention. If you feel that the hand of any candidate is cold and in a limp, know oh mortal that that particular candidate already knows.

Other than some actors overdoing (because no one wants to be accused of underdoing after being defeated), social elections have a positive side to them, which comment is reserved for the few among the elected who dedicate their time and energy to serve in a committee over their tenure. For the chosen others it was an ego drive and an additional line in their CV.

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alternative technique could be developed by which one could tick in favour of more than one candidate jostling for the same post. Alas! That is not allowed in democracy. And who said we have not made our sacrifices to establish the right of the people?

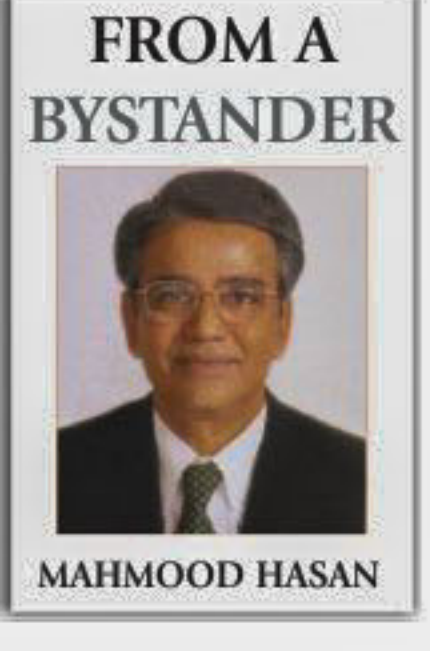
Then there are emails that are virtually an extension of the short messages. You are flooded with information about the candidate that you already knew, especially that he is a great guy with loads of experience for the post or with enough enthusiasm to make up for the lack of it. A colourful poster with a makeover portrait of often a stranger seeking blessings is attached to the mails. The only smiling mortal in this encounter is the person on the poster.

Phone calls are a greater menace because

you have to listen to the aspirant; his pleadings like molten metal pouring down your ear. He has not bothered to call you over the last seven and half years although you had as many birthdays, and now all of a sudden you are the best person second to his wife, which could also be wrong if she was not a voter in that particular election. Or, to be fair to him, you two had never come across each other. In the latter scenario, and it has happened to me, his reaction on meeting you on voting day is a big blank, although he sounded so warm (molten metal is) over telephone. Earlier he was talking to a number, as you will find similar cordiality among operators vending a plot of land in Ashkona or lucrative membership of an exclusive health club.

Ah Facebook! Social media has changed

A bizarre shift in South Korean politics



FROM A BYSTANDER
MAHMOOD HASAN

SOUTH Korean President Park Geun-hye has been impeached on December 9, 2016, following a bizarre scandal.

On October 24, 2016 JTBC (South Korean nationwide cable TV network) broke a story that President Park allowed her close friend Ms. Choi Soon-sil to revise her public speeches and meddle in the affairs of the state. Ms. Choi had no official position in the government but was very close to Ms. Park. The following day Ms. Park admitted her close ties with Ms. Choi, apologised for her carelessness but denied any wrong doing. But by then the stage was set for indictment.

Hundreds of thousands of protesters held peaceful rallies every Saturday in Seoul since October demanding Ms. Park's resignation. The news of impeachment was greeted by people gathered in front of the Parliament chanting, "We won, we won".

Ms. Park has handed over official powers to unelected Prime Minister Hwang Kyo-ahn (59) who will be acting President until the Constitutional Court gives, within six months, its verdict on the legality of the impeachment. Ms. Park cannot be removed until at least 6 out of 9 judges of the Constitutional Court agree. She may even regain her Presidency as has happened with President Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008). If Ms. Park is eventually removed she may face criminal prosecution.

The impeachment motion, moved on December 3, was voted by 234 members of the 300-seat House, much more than the two-third majority required. The ruling centre-right Saenuri Party has 129 seats. The opposition parties – Democratic Party (Social Liberalism, 122 seats), People's Party (Centrism, 38 seats), Justice Party (Progressive, 6 seats) and independents (5 seats) – together have 171 seats. Though it was a secret ballot it is clear that Saenuri is split into two, one faction joining the motion.

Ms. Park, the first female President of South Korea, was elected from the Saenuri Party in December 2012 taking office in February 2013 for five years. She is the daughter of assassinated President Park Chung-hee, the military leader of South Korea at that time. Her mother was assassinated in 1974. She fought the election on an anti-corruption platform and conspicuously stayed away from her siblings to avoid allegation of nepotism. She was seen incorrupt-

Church of Eternal Life. When her mother was killed in 1974 by a North Korean spy, Ms. Park got to know Mr. Choi, who claimed that he was visited by the soul of Ms. Park's late mother, who asked him to guide her. Mr. Choi became Ms. Park's mentor and amassed considerable wealth and power. In 1979 President Park Chung-hee was assassinated and by that time Ms. Park had become fast friend of Mr. Choi's daughter Ms. Choi Soon-sil. That relationship became deeper

position to pressure Korean conglomerates and raked up USD 70 million as donations for her two foundations. Whether Ms. Park was personally involved in these ventures that are being investigated. In return for donations Ms. Choi apparently promised pecuniary benefits to the companies. Indeed, it was a serious breach of trust by Ms. Park.

Ms. Park's impeachment has implications for Korea's security, economy and political future. Ms. Park's removal may embolden

Donald Trump's ill-advised telephone conversation with Taiwan President, that has angered Beijing, may have difficult fallout on South Korea.

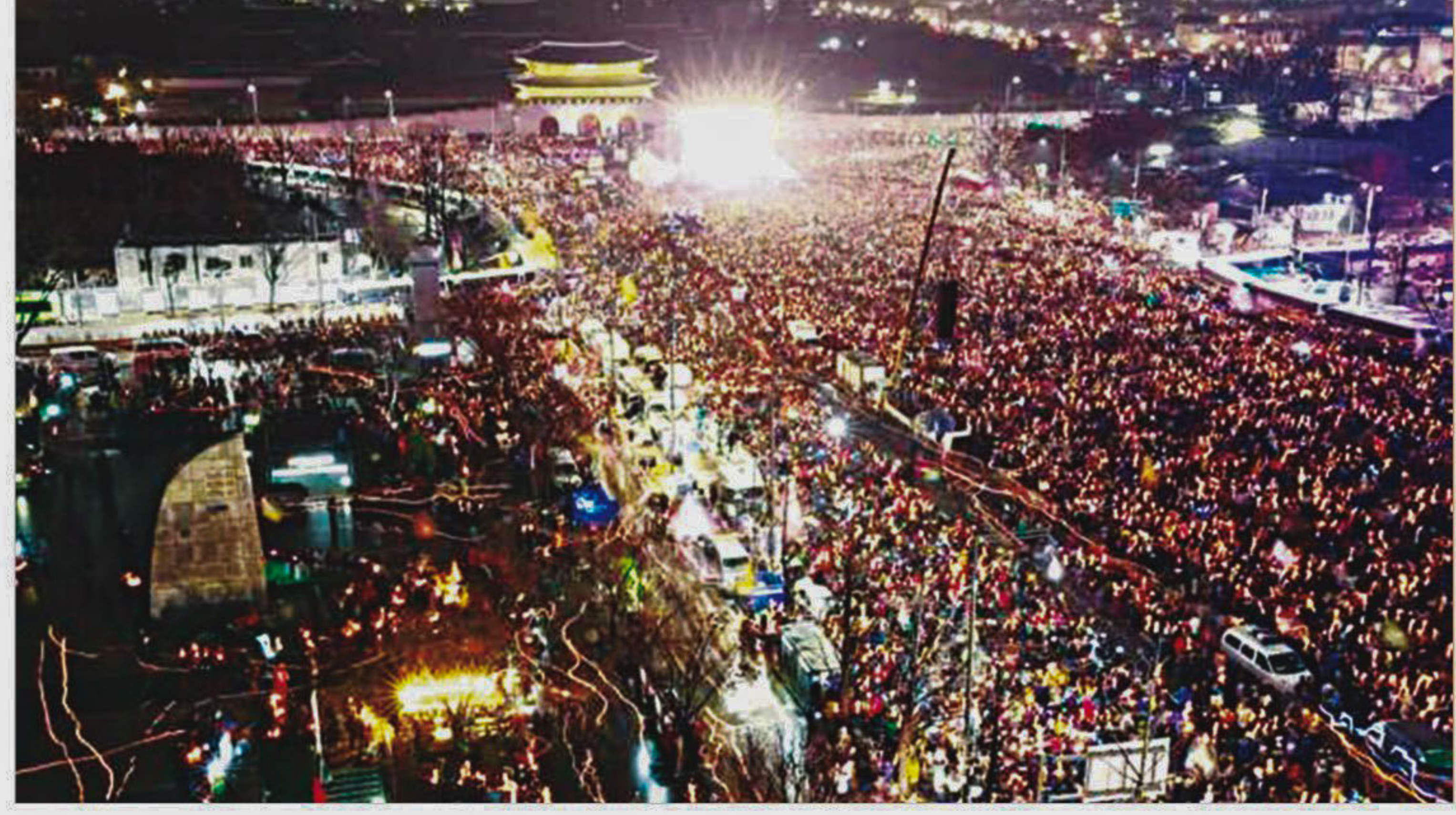
South Korea is an economic power-house but this scandal has pulled out several top corporate leaders to the parliament for hearing. Lawmakers wanted to find out whether the conglomerates (chaebols) were pressured by Ms. Park or her friend to make donations. During 2016 Korean exports declined, government debt increased and household debt rose. The GDP growth declined to 2.7 percent in 2016 compared to 3.3 percent in 2014. There is possibility of further slowing down because of problems in chaebols such as Samsung Electronics, Hyundai motors and Hanjin Shipping.

The political landscape may also change as public awareness towards corruption has become louder as demonstrated by the mass rallies against Ms. Park. Proud Koreans were deeply angered and felt ashamed for what their President had done. There may be real political reforms and cleaner politics. For instance, instead of a single five-year Presidency term to go for two four-year terms for a President. The interface between the ruling class and the chaebols may be strengthened further.

The impeachment has already kicked-off the race for the next Presidential election. Ms. Park said she would remain defiant and wait with "calm and clear mind" while the Court comes up with its verdict. The faction supporting Ms. Park would like her to remain in office, even if without powers, to regain Saenuri's lost credibility before the election. Saenuri leaders worry that a progressive opposition President may overturn Ms. Park's relations with Japan, North Korea and China.

Once vastly popular, Ms. Park's approval rating plummeted drastically to 4 percent from 40 percent when the scandal broke out. It is sad to see the scion of a political family go down so disgracefully for sheer indiscretion. However, public outcry at political scandals was taken seriously by the lawmakers, reflecting that democracy in Korea was going strong.

The writer is former Ambassador and Secretary.



South Korean protesters take part in a candlelight procession towards the presidential house, during a rally against President Park Geun-Hye, in Seoul.

PHOTO: AFP

ible, who has devoted her life to public service.

Who is Ms. Choi Soon-sil? She is the daughter of Mr. Choi Tae-min, whom many described as Korea's Rasputin, was a pseudo-Christian leader who set up a cult called the

after the lonely Ms. Park became President. Though she held no official position, Ms. Choi became increasingly powerful because of her closeness to Ms. Park. Ms. Choi started influencing policy matters and handled classified documents. She also used her

the ever threatening nuclear-armed North Korea to test US resolve to protect South Korea. As Donald Trump attempts to rearrange his security policy towards East Asia he may ask Seoul, a steadfast ally in the region, to pay more for providing American security.

Quotable Quote

SUN TZU
Chinese general, military strategist, and philosopher.

The reason the enlightened prince and the wise general conquer the enemy whenever they move and their achievements surpass those of ordinary men is foreknowledge.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- Commotion
- Caprices
- Takes on
- Canvas holder
- Take on
- Cherish
- Come in first
- Mouse-spotting cry
- Garden visitor
- Latitude
- Need
- Bactrian's counterpart
- Stopwatch button
- Perseus' wife
- Burro sound
- Salad veggie
- Feedbag bit
- Highish card
- Masseur's place
- Spring up
- Resign
- Ominous bird
- Intent look
- Spirited horse
- Pub pints

DOWN

- Knited wrap
- Cleaned up
- Laundry worker
- Workout unit
- Watered down
- Suffered from
- Weather map line
- Ust
- Winter weather
- Travelling trunk
- Ugly building
- Loquacious
- Beat at the board
- Calls for
- Turkish peak
- Local resident
- BLEak
- Have high hopes
- Sows' mates
- Can't stand
- Watch over
- Take in
- Seventh
- Greek letter

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

A	C	H	E	S	D	O	S	E
C	H	A	R	T	R	H	O	D
C	A	R	G	O	U	N	F	I
E	N	D	L	A	M	O	T	T
S	E	W	E	S	S	W	O	N
S	L	A	B	S	U	G	A	R
R	R	S	P	A	R			
N	E	A	T	O	B	E	D	S
L	E	S	A	N	S	S	E	T
A	U	T	O	M	A	T	U	N
C	R	O	W	E	N	A	L	I
K	A	R	E	N	M	E	T	A
S	L	E	D	S	P	E	E	L

BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott