

## The Global Rise of Corruption-Driven Political Change

Christopher Carothers

### Abstract

In recent years, a striking number of presidents and prime ministers around the world have been ousted before the end of their terms because of political fallout from corruption. Corruption-driven political change is an important global trend that signals the rising costs to politicians of engaging in and allowing corruption. Driven by citizens' decreasing tolerance for wrongdoing and growing access to information, this trend is a counterpoint to recent fears that politicians are increasingly escaping accountability by spreading disinformation, polarizing society, or whipping up populist sentiments. Though ousting a corrupt leader is just one step toward the systemic reform necessary to eliminate corruption, the growth of public demands for clean government is a generally positive development for democracy. This essay analyzes dozens of cases around the world and presents a case study of the South Korean protest movement that led to President Park Geun-hye's impeachment and removal from office in 2017.

**Keywords:** Corruption, corruption scandals, democratization, leadership change, new democracies, South Korea.

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Corruption, commonly defined as the abuse of public office for private gain, has been extensively researched in the social sciences as a factor that shapes political and economic outcomes. Countries in which bribery, embezzlement, extortion, vote-buying, or other forms of corruption are widespread have been shown to suffer an array of negative outcomes: weaker provision of public goods,<sup>1</sup> less capable bureaucracy and administration,<sup>2</sup> slower economic

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<sup>1</sup> Albert De Vaal and Wouter Ebben, "Institutions and the Relation between Corruption and Economic Growth," *Review of Development Economics* 15, no. 1 (2011): 108-123.

<sup>2</sup> Arnold J. Heidenheimer and Michael Johnston, *Political Corruption: Concepts & Contexts*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2002), and G. C. Montes and P. C. Paschoal, "Corruption: What Are the Effects on Government Effectiveness? Empirical Evidence Considering Developed and Developing Countries," *Applied Economics Letters* 23, no. 2 (2016): 146-150.

growth,<sup>3</sup> lower public trust in government institutions,<sup>4</sup> and more social unrest.<sup>5</sup> Some scholarship seeks to temper these negative views by pointing out that corruption can sometimes be an informal institution that helps citizens cut through excessive government regulation and “grease the wheels” of economic development.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the overarching consensus in corruption studies remains that in the long-run corruption is almost always detrimental to good governance and development.<sup>7</sup>

Despite corruption’s many negative consequences, scholars note that, in many countries, citizens are unable (or unwilling) to consistently punish politicians who engage in corruption. In authoritarian regimes, this is because regime elites are often able to hide the full extent of their corruption, repress anticorruption protests, and use propaganda to manipulate public opinion on the issue.<sup>8</sup> But even in many democracies, politicians find that engaging in corruption, rather than risking their careers, can actually help them stay in office. Politicians might take bribes in order to finance electoral campaigns,<sup>9</sup> use illicit funds to engage in vote-buying,<sup>10</sup> or overlook corruption by other politicians in return for political loyalty.<sup>11</sup> The potential political costs of engaging in corruption (i.e., losing public support and being thrown out of office) are often highly contingent. In some societies, citizens are willing to overlook corruption as long as politicians deliver economic growth or

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<sup>3</sup> Andrei Shleifer and Robert W. Vishny, “Corruption,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 108 (1993): 599-617, and Paolo Mauro, “Corruption and Growth,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 110 (1995): 681-712.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher J. Anderson and Yuliya V. Tverdova, “Corruption, Political Allegiances, and Attitudes toward Government in Contemporary Democracies,” *American Journal of Political Science* 47, no. 1 (2003): 91-109.

<sup>5</sup> Sarah Chayes, *Thieves of State: Why Corruption Threatens Global Security* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968), 64, and Keith Darden, “The Integrity of Corrupt States: Graft as an Informal State Institution,” *Politics & Society* 36, no. 1 (2008): 35-59.

<sup>7</sup> Pierre-Guillaume Méon and Laurent Weill, “Is Corruption an Efficient Grease?” *World Development* 38, no. 3 (2010), 244-259, and Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, *The Quest for Good Governance: How Societies Develop Control of Corruption* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> For example, the Chinese Communist Party brutally suppressed the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, which were as much about ending government corruption and wrongdoing as about calling for democratization. Since then, accusations of corruption have become “the weapon of choice for political maneuver” among Chinese political elites. Joseph Fewsmith, *China since Tiananmen: From Deng Xiaoping to Hu Jintao*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 231.

<sup>9</sup> Dafydd Fell, *Party Politics in Taiwan: Party Change and the Democratic Evolution of Taiwan, 1991–2004* (London: Routledge, 2005), 56.

<sup>10</sup> Simeon Nichter, “Conceptualizing Vote Buying,” *Electoral Studies* 35 (2014): 315-327.

<sup>11</sup> David Wurfel, *Filipino Politics: Development and Decay* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988).

otherwise “get things done” for constituents.<sup>12</sup> During the Cold War, the primacy of ideological conflict gave politicians in many countries a free pass to govern poorly or corruptly as long as they were strongly anticommunist.<sup>13</sup> And even if citizens in a democracy are determined to end government corruption, there may be significant political or logistical obstacles to launching a public campaign to bring down corrupt officials.<sup>14</sup>

However, existing corruption scholarship has not yet grappled with an important global trend: in recent years, a striking number of presidents and prime ministers have been ousted before the end of their terms because of public anger and legal action relating to corruption. This essay examines this trend, its causes, and its implications. Driven by citizens’ decreasing tolerance for wrongdoing and growing access to information in recent decades, the increase in the ousting of national leaders for corruption signals that the potential costs to politicians of engaging in and allowing corruption have risen. This conclusion serves as a counterpoint to recent fears among many commentators that politicians are increasingly escaping accountability for wrongdoing by spreading disinformation, polarizing society, or whipping up populist sentiments.<sup>15</sup> That said, the ouster of a corrupt leader by itself is unlikely to reduce a country’s overall level of corruption.

Following this introduction, the second section of this essay empirically investigates the global trend in corruption-driven political change in recent years. The third section explains the causes of this trend, while the fourth discusses its broader implications, including for future corruption control and democracy. Then, the fifth section presents a case study of mass protests in South Korea and how they led to the impeachment and removal of President Park Geun-hye in 2017. A brief conclusion summarizes the findings.

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Reid, *Brazil: The Troubled Rise of a Global Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 88, and Milan Vaishnav, *When Crime Pays: Money and Muscle in Indian Politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017).

<sup>13</sup> Laurence Cockcroft, *Global Corruption: Money, Power and Ethics in the Modern World* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012), 8.

<sup>14</sup> Koichi Hasegawa, “A Comparative Study of Social Movements for a Post-Nuclear Energy Era in Japan and the USA,” in *East Asian Social Movements: Power, Protest, and Change in a Dynamic Region*, ed. Jeffrey Broadbent and Vicky Brockman (New York: Springer, 2011), 63-79, and Mitu Sengupta, “Anna Hazare’s Anti-Corruption Movement and the Limits of Mass Mobilization in India,” *Social Movement Studies* 13, no. 3 (2014): 406-413.

<sup>15</sup> Anya Schiffrin, “Disinformation and Democracy: The Internet Transformed Protest but Did Not Improve Democracy,” *Journal of International Affairs* 71, no. 1 (2017): 117-126; Dean Jackson, “How Disinformation Impacts Politics and Publics,” Issue Brief, National Endowment for Democracy (May 29, 2018), <https://www.ned.org/issue-brief-how-disinformation-impacts-politics-and-publics/> (accessed May 29, 2020); and Arjun Bisen, “Disinformation Is Drowning Democracy,” *Foreign Policy* (April 24, 2019), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/24/disinformation-is-drowning-democracy/> (accessed June 8, 2020).

## Brought Down by Corruption

Recently, corruption has become the single most common factor driving “irregular exits” of leaders, in which presidents or prime ministers either resign, are ousted by a no-confidence vote, or are impeached or removed from office before the end of their terms. In 2018 alone, the political fallout from corruption helped push out leaders in countries as diverse as Armenia, Peru, Mauritania, Slovakia, Spain, and South Africa. Peru’s President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski resigned in the face of Odebrecht-related allegations of influence peddling and conflicts of interest, as well as allegedly seeking to bribe members of parliament to prevent his impeachment. Spain’s Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy was ousted in a no-confidence vote following allegations of slush fund-related corruption. And South Africa’s President Jacob Zuma resigned under pressure from the public and his own African National Congress party after numerous corruption accusations tarnished his administration’s image.

Corruption is also contributing to the electoral defeats of numerous incumbents and sparking mass protests in an even larger set of countries. In May 2018, Malaysia’s Prime Minister Najib Razak and his long-ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) suffered a surprise electoral defeat on a wave of public anger at the prime minister’s alleged syphoning of hundreds of millions of dollars from the state investment fund, 1Malaysia Development Berhad, into his personal account.<sup>16</sup> In the past several years, corruption scandals have helped bring down incumbent candidates or parties in Argentina, Benin, Costa Rica, Ghana, India, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, and elsewhere.<sup>17</sup> Opposition parties often campaign on the issue of cleaning up corruption because it has broad appeal and can potentially pull together a big-tent coalition of voters opposed to government malfeasance, even if they might disagree on other issues. The rapid emergence of a broad opposition coalition in Malaysia was critical to Najib Razak’s ouster, for example.<sup>18</sup> In yet other cases, public anger at corruption in recent years has led to consequential protests but not leadership change, as in the Czech Republic, the Dominican Republic, Honduras, Iran, Israel, Malta, Mongolia, Montenegro, and elsewhere.<sup>19</sup> For example, protests in Mongolia over parliamentarians’ alleged diversion of

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<sup>16</sup> Meredith L. Weiss, “Electing Reform: Barisan Nasional Neopatrimonialism as Impetus for and Challenge to Malaysia’s Democratic Transition,” *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 15, no. 1 (July 2019): 41-61.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Carothers and Christopher Carothers, “The One Thing Modern Voters Hate Most,” *Foreign Policy* (July 24, 2018), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/07/24/the-one-thing-modern-voters-hate-most-corruption/> (accessed June 3, 2020).

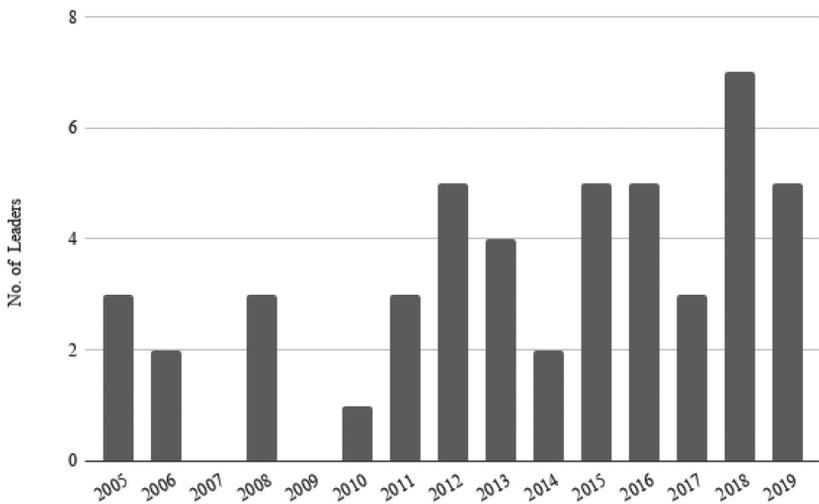
<sup>18</sup> Netina Tan and Cassandra Preece, “How Malaysian Voters Defied the Odds and Ousted Corruption,” *The Conversation* (May 15, 2018), <https://theconversation.com/how-malaysian-voters-defied-the-odds-and-ousted-corruption-96622> (accessed June 3, 2020).

<sup>19</sup> Global Protest Tracker, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/interactive/protest-tracker> (accessed June 1, 2020).

funding intended to support small- and medium-size enterprises successfully pressured the government to expel House Speaker Enkhbold Miyegombo in early 2019.

The trends show that the potential costs of engaging in and allowing widespread corruption have risen for political leaders. Not all corrupt leaders face political or legal consequences for their actions—far from it—but there is a diverse and growing set of cases in which they do (see figure 1 below).

Figure 1. National Leaders Ousted before the End of Their Terms Due to Corruption, 2005–2019



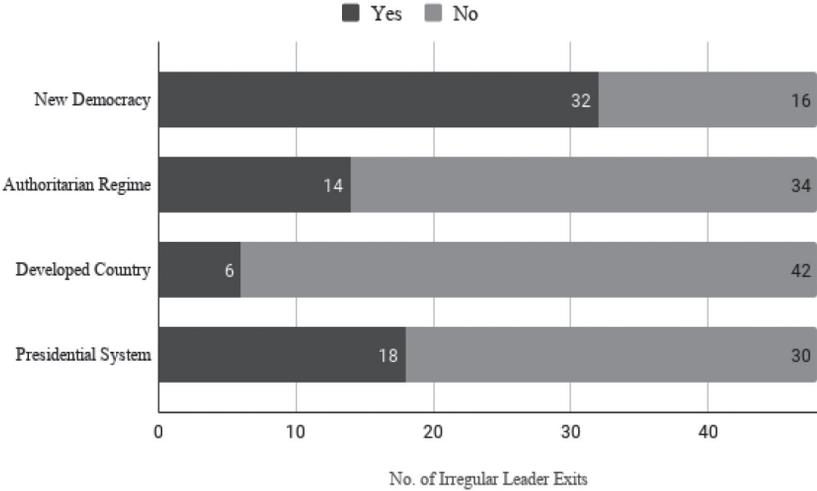
Data Source: Author’s collection.

Figure 1 includes a total of forty-eight cases in which corruption was a major reason for a leader’s ouster.<sup>20</sup> The alleged wrongdoing that brings a leader down can be minor—Iceland’s prime minister trying to conceal the existence of overseas assets—or a major offense tied to systemic corruption that indicts a country’s entire political class. Leadership ousters are rarely only about corruption, however. Alongside corruption, public anger in these forty-eight cases often was driven by inequality, a lack of democracy, and unpopular austerity measures, among other issues.

<sup>20</sup> Figure 1 excludes cases in which the president or prime minister held a largely ceremonial position, such as Germany’s President Christian Wulff, who resigned in 2012 following accusations of influence peddling. It also excludes cases in which leaders of territories or other nonindependent countries were ousted, such as the Cayman Islands’ Premier McKeeva Bush’s removal in a no-confidence vote after being arrested for embezzlement in 2012. This set of cases was assembled through an extensive search of global news reports.

The countries in which leaders have recently been ousted vary in terms of their political systems and development trajectories. Figure 2 shows a breakdown of where leaders have been forced to make irregular exits.

Figure 2. Where Leaders Were Ousted Due to Corruption, 2005–2019



Data Sources: New democracies are countries that underwent democratization during the “Third Wave” (starting in 1974) or afterward. See Scott Mainwaring and Fernando Bizzarro, “The Fates of Third-Wave Democracies,” *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 1 (2019): 99-113. Authoritarian regimes are those that Freedom House scores as “not electoral democracies” in the year of transition; developed countries are those that the IMF lists as “advanced economies.”

Figure 2 shows that the majority of corruption-driven removals from office have been in new democracies, such as Peru, South Africa, and Ukraine. This likely reflects the fact that it is easier to oust leaders in democratic political systems, which are relatively open and transparent. But there also have been fourteen cases in which corruption has contributed to the ouster of an authoritarian leader, such as in Georgia in 2003 and Tunisia in 2011.

A leadership ouster often has larger political consequences, which can range from a replacement of the party in power, to a disruption of the existing party system, and in some cases, to a full-blown regime change. Sometimes anger over government corruption has helped bring down not just an autocrat but also an entire authoritarian regime, as in Ukraine in 2004.<sup>21</sup> However, in

<sup>21</sup> Though it held somewhat competitive elections, Ukraine before the Orange Revolution should still be regarded as a nondemocracy. See Lucan A. Way, “Ukraine’s Orange Revolution: Kuchma’s Failed Authoritarianism,” *Journal of Democracy* 16, no. 2 (2005): 131-145.

a few cases, popular dissatisfaction with corruption has weakened democratic governments and allowed autocrats to come to power with promises of a clean-up. Military leaders of the coup in Thailand in 2014 used corruption as an excuse to take over, for example.

## Causes

This section of the essay argues that more national leaders are being ousted for corruption because publics have become less tolerant of it and are increasingly able to investigate and mobilize against corrupt politicians. Behind these developments are global events and trends that have shaped domestic politics in many countries: the end of the Cold War, rising wealth and education, the 2008 financial crisis, and the spread of new technologies. Alternative explanations, such as that more leaders are being ousted for corruption simply because there is more corruption than before, are less persuasive.

### *Decreasing Tolerance for Corruption*

During the Cold War, politics in most countries were deeply affected by the global ideological polarization. Many political leaders won or lost public support based on their ideological stances or affiliations, especially whether they were for or against communism. Citizens fearful of a communist invasion or insurgency rallied around strongly anticommunist leaders who promised security, even if these leaders governed poorly or corruptly. Moreover, foreign allies often overlooked corruption and other maladministration as long as a government supported their side. As Laurence Cockcroft writes, “the international policies of Western governments tolerated corruption on a huge scale, on the grounds that an anti-Communist position trumped all others.”<sup>22</sup>

After the end of the Cold War, publics reassessed their interests. With the rapid decline of ideological battles and decreased threat of foreign invasion,<sup>23</sup> publics became more focused on whether their leaders were providing good governance and growing the economy.<sup>24</sup> Escalating calls around the world for democracy at the end of the Cold War often had anticorruption demands

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<sup>22</sup> Cockcroft, *Global Corruption*, 8.

<sup>23</sup> Andrew Mack, “Global Political Violence: Explaining the Post-Cold War Decline,” in *Strategies for Peace: Contributions of International Organizations, States, and Non-State Actors*, ed. Volker Rittberger and Martina Fischer (Opladen, Germany: Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2008), 75-107.

<sup>24</sup> Susan J. Pharr and Robert D. Putnam, *Disaffected Democracies: What's Troubling the Trilateral Countries?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Susan Pharr, “Public Trust and Corruption in Japan,” in *Political Corruption, Concepts and Contexts*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., ed. Arnold Heidenheimer and Michael Johnson (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2002), 835-862; and Bianca Clausen, Aart Kraay, and Zsolt Nyiri, “Corruption and Confidence in Public Institutions: Evidence From a Global Survey,” *World Bank Economic Review* 25, no. 2 (2011): 212-249.

as a key component, as in the Tiananmen Square protests.<sup>25</sup> Foreign allies likewise shifted their expectations. In fits and starts, the United States reversed its past support for corrupt dictators who no longer served American geostrategic interests.

Rising wealth and education have changed and continue to change public expectations about how political leaders should act. In earlier times, corruption was accepted in many societies as an inevitable feature of politics. That leaders stole from the government was assumed and mattered little as long as they achieved results in other areas. In Brazil, a common expression for half a century was, “He steals, but he gets things done.”<sup>26</sup> In the Philippines under the appallingly corrupt president, Ferdinand Marcos, U.S. Ambassador Henry Byroade noted that “the whole atmosphere has been one of public expectancy that anyone able to move through these ranks would capitalize financially on their positions—and anyone who did not would be considered naive indeed—if not down-right incapable.”<sup>27</sup> But research shows that wealthier and better-educated populations are generally less accepting of corruption, less susceptible to vote-buying strategies by politicians, and less likely to engage in corrupt behaviors out of economic necessity than less well-off societies.<sup>28</sup> In Brazil, past lenient attitudes have fallen away, as evidenced by repeated mass protests against the corrupt political establishment throughout the 2010s. Surveys suggest that educated and wealthy Brazilians have been generally more concerned than others with the problem of corruption.<sup>29</sup>

The 2008 financial crisis fueled public anger at establishment politicians globally, which likely contributed to movements that brought down corrupt presidents and prime ministers in the years thereafter. Scholarship has shown that the financial crisis not only created a tremendous amount of economic pain around the world, but also decreased many citizens’ trust in their governments

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<sup>25</sup> Clemens Ostergaard and Christina Petersen, “Official Profiteering and the Tiananmen Square Demonstrations in China,” *Corruption and Reform* 6, no. 2 (1991): 87-108, and Carolyn L. Hsu, “Political Narratives and the Production of Legitimacy: The Case of Corruption in Post-Mao China,” *Qualitative Sociology* 24, no. 1 (2001): 25-54.

<sup>26</sup> Reid, *Brazil*, 88.

<sup>27</sup> “Letter from the Ambassador to the Philippines (Byroade) to President Nixon,” May 13, 1970, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–72, Volume XX, Southeast Asia*, Office of the Historian at the U.S. Department of State, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v20/d219> (accessed September 2, 2020).

<sup>28</sup> Rory Truex, “Corruption, Attitudes, and Education: Survey Evidence From Nepal,” *World Development* 39, no. 7 (2011): 1133-1142, and Peter Sandholt Jensen and Mogens K. Justesen, “Poverty and Vote Buying: Survey-Based Evidence from Africa,” *Electoral Studies* 33 (March 2014): 220-232.

<sup>29</sup> Kelly Senters, Rebecca Weitz-Shapiro, and Matthew S. Winters, “Continuity and Change in Public Attitudes toward Corruption,” in *Routledge Handbook of Brazilian Politics*, ed. Barry Ames (New York: Routledge, 2018), 15-38.

and fueled the rise of populism and other political change.<sup>30</sup> Populists such as Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro and Guatemala's President Jimmy Morales came to power after more establishment political figures were ousted for corruption. That said, many changes that signaled the rising political salience of corruption predate the 2008 financial crisis, such as the increasing focus on the issue by international organizations and academic research in the 1990s.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, corruption-driven leadership ousters are increasing even more a decade after the financial crisis, suggesting that a mix of factors is at work.

The spread of new technologies, especially the internet and cell phones, has made it easier for people to learn about government corruption and to organize against it. A large literature on the role of new technologies in corruption control explains how they have helped civil society and independent media monitor the government, improving government transparency and accountability.<sup>32</sup> Anticorruption activists in numerous countries have used the internet to uncover evidence of politicians' secret mansions or luxury watches and share their findings with a national or even global audience. In China, for example, the spread of internet access in the 2000s allowed citizen activists to create websites dedicated to reporting on corruption, inequality, and mistreatment by government officials, often sparking nationwide public outcries.<sup>33</sup> Protests of all kinds increasingly are being organized through social media, as was widely reported about the protests during the Arab Spring.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Giulia M. Dotti Sani and Beatrice Magistro, "Increasingly Unequal? The Economic Crisis, Social Inequalities and Trust in the European Parliament in 20 European Countries," *European Journal of Political Research* 55, no. 2 (2016): 246-264, and Yann Algan, Sergei Guriev, Elias Papaioannou, and Evgenia Passari, "The European Trust Crisis and the Rise of Populism," *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity* 2017, no. 2 (2017): 309-400.

<sup>31</sup> See Bo Rothstein and Aiysha Varraich, *Making Sense of Corruption* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 7.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Barnebeck Andersen, "E-Government as an Anti-Corruption Strategy," *Information Economics and Policy* 21, no. 3 (2009): 201-210; Mon-Chi Lio, Meng-Chun Liu, and Yi-Pey Ou, "Can the Internet Reduce Corruption? A Cross-Country Study Based on Dynamic Panel Data Models," *Government Information Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (2011): 47-53; Jeannine E. Relly, "Examining a Model of Vertical Accountability: A Cross-National Study of the Influence of Information Access on the Control of Corruption," *Government Information Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (2012): 335-345; Daniel A. Kanyam, Genti Kostandini, and Susana Ferreira, "The Mobile Phone Revolution: Have Mobile Phones and the Internet Reduced Corruption in Sub-Saharan Africa?" *World Development* 99 (2017): 271-284; and Isabelle Adam and Mihály Fazekas, "Are Emerging Technologies Helping Win the Fight against Corruption in Developing Countries?" *Pathways for Prosperity Commission, Background Paper Series* 21 (December 2018).

<sup>33</sup> Xiao Qiang, "The Rise of Online Public Opinion and Its Political Impact," in *Changing Media, Changing China*, ed. Susan Shirk (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 202-224.

<sup>34</sup> Philip N. Howard, Aiden Duffy, Deen Freelon, Muzammil M. Hussain, Will Mari, and Marwa Maziad, "Opening Closed Regimes: What Was the Role of Social Media during the Arab Spring?" (2011), <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2595096> (accessed June 8, 2020), and Gadi Wolfsfeld, Elad Segev, and Tamir Sheafer, "Social Media and the Arab Spring: Politics Comes First," *International Journal of Press/Politics* 18, no. 2 (2013): 115-137.

Yet another factor is that the fight against corruption has become internationalized since the 1990s, and therefore strengthened. A key turning point in this regard was the embrace by the World Bank in the mid-1990s of anticorruption as a serious development priority. Most major donor governments have since adopted anticorruption as a policy goal and funded countless programs and initiatives around the world to support that goal. A United Nations-backed anticorruption commission established in 2006 helped Guatemalan prosecutors bring down President Otto Pérez Molina and numerous other Guatemalan politicians, though unfortunately the commission was kicked out of the country in 2019. In addition, global measures of corruption or corruption perceptions, such as those produced by the World Bank and Transparency International, have proliferated.

As part of the process of internationalization, revelations of corruption now often originate outside the country in question, making it harder for governments to stifle such information. The release of the Panama Papers in 2016, for example, was the result of international cooperation by thousands of journalists and led to follow-up investigations in dozens of countries. Latin America's sprawling Odebrecht scandal (Odebrecht is a Brazilian conglomerate) shows how revelations of corruption in one country can quickly lead to numerous accusations against political leaders across an entire continent.<sup>35</sup> In countries with weak independent media, anticorruption advocacy can get a shot in the arm from investigatory reporting by prominent media publications and services such as the *New York Times* and Reuters. Evidence of corruption that emerged abroad has helped Peru's justice system bring charges against five of the country's former presidents.<sup>36</sup>

### ***Alternative Explanations***

The above explanation of corruption-driven leadership ousters leaves out several other possibilities. For example, rather than publics having become less tolerant of corruption, could it simply be that there is more corruption today than there was thirty or forty years ago? That corruption has objectively increased globally cannot be ruled out, given the difficulties in objectively measuring the phenomenon. However, the countries in which leaders have recently been ousted for corruption are far from the most corrupt, and the connection between rising corruption and ousters is often unclear. Judging by the World Bank's Control of Corruption Index (CC) and Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), most countries in which leaders were ousted for corruption had roughly average levels of corruption.

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<sup>35</sup> Robert I. Rotberg, "The Corruption of Latin America," in *Corruption in Latin America*, ed. Robert I. Rotberg (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 1-25.

<sup>36</sup> Sonia Goldenberg, "Does Peru Need a Special Prison Just for Ex-Presidents?" *New York Times* (August 7, 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/07/opinion/does-peru-need-a-special-prison-just-for-ex-presidents.html> (accessed June 10, 2020).

Some cases were even in countries known to have very low levels of corruption, such as Iceland. In other countries, highly corrupt leaders ruled in similar ways for decades before facing mass anticorruption protests and being ousted, such as Tunisia's President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Long-standing grievances against the regime's corruption helped protests emerge and succeed in Tunisia in 2010–2011, but it is not clear that they were triggered by any sudden rise in the amount of government corruption. Finally, there is direct evidence of citizens' rising standards. In South Korea and Taiwan, for example, public dissatisfaction with the level of corruption has remained high, even as reported experiences with corruption have decreased significantly from past decades.<sup>37</sup>

Has ousting political leaders simply become easier in recent decades, perhaps because more countries have democratic governments that are more responsive than authoritarian regimes to public demands? Certainly, it is notable that most cases of a leader being ousted due to corruption are in democracies, even though the world's most corrupt countries tend to have authoritarian governments. Regimes that have remained authoritarian have shown that they can use a combination of propaganda and coercion to prevent the public from revolting over corruption. For example, since 2012, President Xi Jinping has led the Chinese Communist Party in a tightly controlled anticorruption campaign that leaves no room for grassroots protests over corruption. Part of this campaign involves government propaganda to the effect that "anti-corruption efforts must be led by the party" and that "corruption is a personal moral failing rather than a result of perverse structural incentives."<sup>38</sup> Whether Chinese citizens are persuaded by this party line is a hotly debated topic.<sup>39</sup> Regardless, the fact that ousting leaders is easier in democracies does not explain why a growing number of autocrats have been brought down by corruption in recent years as well. Moreover, many anticorruption protests fail to oust democratic leaders but still shake up national politics. And finally, even if political leaders are generally easier to oust than before, this does not explain the prominence of the particular issue of corruption in so many diverse cases.

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<sup>37</sup> You Jong-sung, "Is South Korea Succeeding in Controlling Corruption?" APSA 2009 Toronto Meeting Paper, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1451894> (accessed June 10, 2020); "People and Corruption: Asia Pacific," Global Corruption Barometer, Transparency International (2017), 11; Thomas Kalinowski, "Trends and Mechanisms of Corruption in South Korea," *Pacific Review* 29, no. 4 (2016): 625-645; Yu Chilik, Chen Chun-Ming, and Lin Min-Wei, "Corruption Perception in Taiwan: Reflections upon a Bottom-Up Citizen Perspective," *Journal of Contemporary China* 22, no. 79 (2013): 56-76; and "Global Corruption Barometer | Taiwan," Transparency International (2013), <https://www.transparency.org/gcb2013/country?country=taiwan> (accessed June 1, 2020).

<sup>38</sup> Christopher Carothers, "Taking Authoritarian Anti-Corruption Reform Seriously," *Perspectives on Politics* (forthcoming): 11.

<sup>39</sup> Edward Cunningham, Tony Saich, and Jessie Turiel, "Understanding CCP Resilience: Surveying Chinese Public Opinion through Time," Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation (July 2020), <https://ash.harvard.edu/publications/understanding-ccp-resilience-surveying-chinese-public-opinion-through-time> (accessed July 22, 2020).

## Implications for Corruption Control and Democracy

This section of the essay lays out the implications of the rising tide of leaders ousted due to corruption for future corruption control and democracy around the world. It suggests that the implications are mixed. On the one hand, leadership ousters due to corruption have generally not led to reductions in countries' overall levels of corruption. Showing a corrupt president or prime minister the door is just one step toward the systemic reform necessary to end entrenched government corruption. On the other hand, the fact that leaders are increasingly being ousted for corruption cuts against the troubling idea that has emerged in recent years that politicians in democracies can evade accountability by spreading enough misinformation, being polarizing enough, or making anti-establishment populist appeals. While corruption-driven political change has so far not produced a global wave of democratizations, it is overall a positive development for democracy.

Countries' removal of corrupt leaders generally has not led to overall reductions in national levels of corruption. In many cases, one corrupt leader has simply replaced another. For example, after ousting Prime Minister Petr Nečas in 2013, the Czech people soon returned to protests against the corruption of current Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babis.<sup>40</sup> In almost none of the forty-eight cases of corruption-driven irregular leader exit between 2005 and 2019 did Transparency International's CPI record a significantly lower average perception of corruption following the leader's ouster.<sup>41</sup> This outcome is unsurprising given the consensus in existing corruption scholarship that curbing corruption requires systemic political and social change.<sup>42</sup> Anticorruption reforms do not have to be gradual—some scholars argue that a “big bang” of rapid reforms can shift a country to a new low-corruption equilibrium—but they are necessarily deeper than removing a single president or prime minister.<sup>43</sup> Anticorruption activists have found that leveraging anticorruption protests into institutional reforms is a major challenge, even if the public is overwhelmingly in favor.

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<sup>40</sup> Hana de Goeij and Marc Santora, “In the Largest Protests in Decades, Czechs Demand Resignation of Prime Minister,” *New York Times* (June 23, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/23/world/europe/czech-republic-protests-andrej-babis.html> (accessed May 29, 2020).

<sup>41</sup> A significant drop is defined here as a three-year average CPI that is more than five points lower than the three-year average prior to the year in which the leader was ousted.

<sup>42</sup> Michael Johnston, *Corruption, Contention and Reform: The Power of Deep Democratization* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Robert I. Rotberg, *The Corruption Cure: How Citizens and Leaders Can Combat Graft* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017); and Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, “Seven Steps to Control of Corruption: The Road Map,” *Daedalus* 147, no. 3 (2018): 20-34.

<sup>43</sup> Bo Rothstein, “Anti-Corruption: The Indirect ‘Big Bang’ Approach,” *Review of International Political Economy* 18, no. 2 (2011): 228-250.

Adding to the difficulty of clean government reform in recent decades has been the internationalization of corruption. Chinese and Russian investments in developing countries are often “corrosive capital,” which corrodes democratic institutions and exports corruption to the recipient country.<sup>44</sup> Chinese investments, in particular, have grown exponentially since 2000, but lack transparency and sometimes violate domestic laws.<sup>45</sup> Globalization has allowed local corrupt actors to form transnational networks, to exploit weak points in global accountability systems, and to find new revenue streams. In some cases mentioned in this study, it was precisely the corruption linked to transnational actors that stirred public anger. For example, the 1Malaysia Development Berhad scandal that contributed to Prime Minister Najib Razak’s being booted from power had sprawling international dimensions.

There have been a few anticorruption success stories among new democracies. In the 1980s and 1990s, Taiwan was plagued with corrupt “black gold” (*heijin*) politics: bid-rigging, vote-buying, mafia politicians, and all manner of illicit deals among government officials and well-connected businesspeople.<sup>46</sup> But voters balked, and turned curbing corruption into “arguably the most salient political issue.”<sup>47</sup> The opposition Democratic Progressive Party won power for the first time in 2000 and rapidly advanced a substantial anticorruption agenda.<sup>48</sup> The ousted Kuomintang establishment at first resisted reforms, but soon bowed to public pressure and began to compete by cleaning up its image.<sup>49</sup> Throughout the 2000s and early 2010s, a series of reforms substantially reduced “black gold” politics and strengthened corruption control, earning Taiwan international plaudits.<sup>50</sup> Georgia is another commonly

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<sup>44</sup> John Morrell, “Channeling the Tide: Protecting Democracies Amid a Flood of Corrosive Capital,” Center for International Private Enterprise (September 2018), <https://www.cipe.org/resources/channeling-the-tide-protecting-democracies-amid-a-flood-of-corrosive-capital/> (accessed September 2, 2020).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Chin Ko-lin, *Heijin: Organized Crime, Business, and Politics in Taiwan* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2003), and Christian Göbel, “Beheading the Hydra: Combating Political Corruption and Organized Crime in the KMT and DPP Eras,” *China Perspectives*, no. 56 (2004): 14-25.

<sup>47</sup> Dafydd Fell, *Party Politics in Taiwan: Party Change and the Democratic Evolution of Taiwan, 1991–2004* (London: Routledge, 2005), 24.

<sup>48</sup> Hsueh Chao-Yung, “Power and Corruption in Taiwan,” *Issues & Studies* 43, no. 1 (2007): 1-39.

<sup>49</sup> Christian Göbel, “Taiwan’s Fight against Corruption,” *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1 (2016): 134.

<sup>50</sup> “Global Corruption Barometer | Taiwan,” Transparency International (2013), <https://www.transparency.org/gcb2013/country?country=taiwan> (accessed June 1, 2020); “Corruption Levels Fall to 10-Year Low in Taiwan,” *Taiwan Today* (April 7, 2015), <https://taiwantoday.tw/news.php?unit=2&post=3622> (accessed June 1, 2020); Liu Kuan-lin and Lin Hong-han, “Taiwan Ranks 29th Least Corrupt on Global Corruption Index,” *Focus Taiwan* (February 22, 2018), <http://focustaiwan.tw/news/asoc/201802220007.aspx> (accessed June 1, 2020); and “BTI 2018 | Taiwan Country Report,” Bertelsmann Transformation Index (2018), [https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2015262/BTI\\_2018\\_Taiwan.pdf](https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2015262/BTI_2018_Taiwan.pdf) (accessed September 2, 2020).

cited success case, though a controversial one because of the strong-arm tactics and borderline authoritarian approach President Mikheil Saakashvili took to curbing corruption.<sup>51</sup> In 2003, the massive protest movement known as the Rose Revolution emerged in opposition to the electoral manipulation, corruption, and general economic mismanagement of a political establishment still populated by Soviet-era holdovers. Saakashvili came to power and over the next decade modernized and rationalized the public sector, liberalized the economy, went to war with organized crime, and undertook other reforms that most domestic and international observers have concluded considerably reduced corruption.<sup>52</sup> As stated, however, anticorruption success cases among young democracies have been the exception rather than the rule.

Though leadership ousters rarely trigger systematic corruption clean-ups, the growth of public demands for clean government and increasing mobilization around those demands are largely positive developments for democracy. Democracy is strengthened when citizens are able to hold their leaders accountable for criminal behavior. It is encouraging that public anger at politicians' taking bribes in return for favors, misappropriating state funds, buying votes, and engaging in other corruption often has cut through political disinformation and polarization. Democratic political systems, even if they are corrupt, polarized, or otherwise troubled, have institutional mechanisms that incentivize powerholders to respond to changes in public demands. Public political mobilization rarely achieves its ultimate goals quickly or smoothly, but in many countries, citizens calling for corruption control are proving that they can use democratic institutions to effect change.

Such a conclusion cuts against several troubling trends that have thrown accountability in democracies into doubt in recent years: the global spread of politically charged disinformation,<sup>53</sup> heightened polarization in many societies,<sup>54</sup> the democratic recession,<sup>55</sup> and the rise of populist leaders who reject institutional checks on their power.<sup>56</sup> Popular political leaders have sometimes seemed immune to allegations of serious corruption. At other

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<sup>51</sup> Rachel Kleinfeld, *A Savage Order: How the World's Deadliest Countries Can Forge a Path to Security* (New York: Pantheon, 2018).

<sup>52</sup> Alexander Kupatadze, "Explaining Georgia's Anti-Corruption Drive," *European Security* 21, no. 1 (2012): 16-36; Huseyn Aliyev, "The Effects of the Saakashvili Era Reforms on Informal Practices in the Republic of Georgia," *Studies of Transition States and Societies* 6, no. 1 (2014): 19-33; and Peter Nasuti, "Administrative Cohesion and Anti-Corruption Reforms in Georgia and Ukraine," *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no. 5 (2016): 847-867.

<sup>53</sup> Bisen, "Disinformation Is Drowning Democracy."

<sup>54</sup> Thomas Carothers and Andrew O'Donohue, eds., *Democracies Divided: The Global Challenge of Political Polarization* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2019).

<sup>55</sup> Larry Diamond, "Democracy Demotion: How the Freedom Agenda Fell Apart," *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 4 (2019): 17.

<sup>56</sup> Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).

times, public opinion on corruption may be manipulated by elites for political advantage. Scholars have noted that Brazil's President Dilma Rousseff was impeached in 2016 in a highly partisan and polarized context supposedly over a minor legal infraction relating to budgeting.<sup>57</sup> In other cases, however, the leader's ouster came about precisely because anger at his or her wrongdoing crossed party lines and split his or her support base, such as in the removal of South Korea's President Park Geun-hye.

## South Korea and the Removal of President Park Geun-hye

Throughout late 2016 and early 2017, millions of Koreans took to the streets in a spectacular and forceful—though peaceful—display of public anger over revelations of corruption and deception practiced by then President Park Geun-hye, who had become the country's first female leader in February 2013. This protest movement, known as the Candlelight Demonstrations, led to Park's impeachment and removal in December 2016 and March 2017, respectively. This was the first time a South Korean president had been legally removed from office before the end of his or her term. The Candlelight Demonstrations have been celebrated by many Koreans as a historic accomplishment that built on the legacies of the April 19 Revolution in 1960 and the June Democracy Movement in 1987 to strengthen and renew their democracy.<sup>58</sup> Koreans had stood up and demanded an end to government corruption. Many also felt that the demonstrations proved that South Koreans were rejecting the lingering influence of the country's authoritarian past.<sup>59</sup> Park, who was the daughter of former dictator Park Chung-hee (1961–1979), often showed autocratic instincts as president: she ordered the harassment and prosecution of protesters and her critics on social media, used the National Intelligence Service for political purposes, blacklisted artists seen as critical of her administration, and

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<sup>57</sup> Amanda Taub, "All Impeachments Are Political. But Was Brazil's Something More Sinister?" *New York Times* (August 31, 2016), <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/01/world/americas/brazil-impeachment-coup.html> (accessed June 8, 2020), and Mads Damgaard, "Cascading Corruption News: Explaining the Bias of Media Attention to Brazil's Political Scandals," *Opinião Pública* 24, no. 1 (2018): 114-143.

<sup>58</sup> Kang Woo Jin, "87 년 체제와 촛불시민혁명: 한국 민주주의의 전환" [The 1987 political systems and the 2017 citizen revolution: Transformation of Korean democracy], *정치비평* [Political Critique] 10, no. 1 (2017): 47-86; Kim Nan, "Candlelight and the Yellow Ribbon: Catalyzing Re-Democratization in South Korea," *Asia-Pacific Journal* 15, issue 14, no. 5 (2017): 1-15; and Paul Chang, "Candlelight Protests in South Korea: The Legacies of Authoritarianism and Democratization" (April 30, 2018), *Ewha Journal of Social Sciences* 34, no. 1 (2018), <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3171550> (accessed June 9, 2020).

<sup>59</sup> Shin Jin-wook, "촛불집회와 한국 민주주의의 진자 운동, 1987—2017: 포스트권위주의와 포스트민주주의 문제의 동시성을 중심으로" [Candlelight protests and the pendular movement of Korean democracy, 1987—2017: With a focus on the simultaneousness of the problems of post-authoritarian democracy and post-democracy], *기억과 전망* [Memories and Prospects] 39 (2018): 55-100.

hid problems with the government's response to the Sewol Ferry disaster in 2014, among other unsavory activities.<sup>60</sup>

To understand the significance of this corruption-driven political change, it is necessary to look back at the history of corruption and anticorruption in South Korea since democratization, including the legacies of the authoritarian period. South Korea began to democratize after the success of the 1987 June Democracy Movement and saw former opposition leader Kim Young-sam become president in 1993. As in many Third Wave democracies, one of the public's first demands of its newly democratic government was to punish the previous authoritarian regime for its many abuses of power, including its corruption. President Kim swiftly ordered the arrest of the two previous presidents, the military dictator, Chun Doo-hwan, and his successor and close ally, Roh Tae-woo. Both Chun and Roh were convicted of various crimes related to the coup in 1979, the brutal crackdown on the Gwangju Uprising (1980), and corruption.<sup>61</sup> Under Chun's government in the 1980s, there had been widespread plundering of state assets by his family members and political cronies and flagrant extortion of businesses for political donations.<sup>62</sup> Chun later admitted to having a slush fund of nearly \$900 million, at least \$275 million of which met the legal definition of bribery.<sup>63</sup>

President Kim launched major anticorruption reforms in his five-year term. Beyond just the two past presidents, dozens of generals, National Assembly members, prominent bankers, and other elites were dismissed from office and arrested on corruption-related charges.<sup>64</sup> Many were caught by the rule that unexplained wealth would be treated as evidence of corruption.<sup>65</sup> The new administration passed the Public Officials Ethics Law, which required seven thousand top politicians and civil servants to disclose their assets and make annual follow-up reports.<sup>66</sup> It also rolled out regulations that required citizens to attach their real names to bank accounts and reformed campaign

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<sup>60</sup> Dave Hazzan, "Is South Korea Regressing into a Dictatorship?" *Foreign Policy* (July 14, 2016), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/07/14/is-south-korea-regressing-into-a-dictatorship-park-geun-hye/> (accessed June 9, 2020).

<sup>61</sup> Corruption charges came first and then the others were added. See Young W. Kihl, *Transforming Korean Politics: Democracy, Reform, and Culture* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2005), 130.

<sup>62</sup> Andrew H. Wedeman, "Looters, Rent-Scrapers, and Dividend-Collectors: Corruption and Growth in Zaire, South Korea, and the Philippines," *Journal of Developing Areas* 31, no. 4 (1997): 457-478, and Martin Hart-Landsberg, *The Rush to Development: Economic Change and Political Struggle in South Korea* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1993), 236.

<sup>63</sup> Nicholas D. Kristof, "Seoul Indicts Ex-President on Bribery Charges," *New York Times* (January 13, 1996), <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/01/13/world/seoul-indicts-ex-president-on-bribery-charges.html> (accessed June 8, 2020).

<sup>64</sup> Hoon Shim Jae, "South Korea: Assets and Anxiety," *Far Eastern Economic Review* (April 8, 1993): 20.

<sup>65</sup> Lee Chong-Sik and Sohn Hyuk-Sang, "South Korea in 1993: The Year of the Great Reform," *Asian Survey* 34, no. 1 (1994): 3.

<sup>66</sup> Ed Paisly, "Media: Dominance, Submission," *Far Eastern Economic Review* (June 24, 1993): 64.

expenditures with the passage of the Election Malpractice Prevention Act.<sup>67</sup> These reforms helped curb corruption and, despite accusations of partisan bias in whom the Kim administration chose to prosecute, were very popular with the public.<sup>68</sup>

South Korea's authoritarian past left a mixed legacy on corruption that has influenced the democratic administrations in the decades since. On the one hand, developmental dictator Park Chung-hee had led the successful construction of a capable and relatively clean state apparatus in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>69</sup> Bureaucratic professionalism and quality persisted, even though Park's government and Chun's after it engaged in harsh suppression of civil society and corruption was widespread in the political system, especially state–business collusion.<sup>70</sup> On the other hand, the authoritarian period also passed on a tradition of overly powerful presidents and cozy ties between politicians and business elites.<sup>71</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the conflicting outcomes have led to a mixed result for corruption control in South Korea since democratization. Successive democratic administrations that inherited the authoritarian period's relatively clean state apparatus were able to use it to enforce further anticorruption legislation and reforms. Reforms in the late 1990s and throughout the 2000s under presidents Kim Dae-jung, Roh Moo-hyun, and Lee Myung-bak built on the Kim Young-sam administration's successes.<sup>72</sup> Instances of corruption in

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<sup>67</sup> John Kie-Chiang Oh, *Korean Politics: The Quest for Democratization and Economic Development* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 142-143, and Kim Myoung-soo, "Regulation and Corruption," in *The White House and the Blue House: Government Reform in the United States and Korea*, ed. Cho Yong Hyo and H. George Frederickson (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1997), 255.

<sup>68</sup> Oh, *Korean Politics*, 142-143; Paisly, "Media: Dominance, Submission"; and Lee and Sohn, "South Korea in 1993," 4.

<sup>69</sup> Ha Yong-Chool and Kang Myung-Koo, "Creating a Capable Bureaucracy with Loyalists: The Internal Dynamics of the South Korean Developmental State, 1948–1979," *Comparative Political Studies* 44, no. 1 (2011): 78-108; Kim Byung-Kook and Ezra F. Vogel, eds. *The Park Chung Hee Era: The Transformation of South Korea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); and You Jong-Sung, "Demystifying the Park Chung-Hee Myth: Land Reform in the Evolution of Korea's Developmental State," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, no. 4 (2017): 535-556.

<sup>70</sup> David C. Kang, *Crony Capitalism: Corruption and Development in South Korea and the Philippines* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>71</sup> Verena Blechinger, "Report on Recent Bribery Scandals, 1996–2000," Transparency International (2000), p. 2, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/9325/bc7036acc96af8d920658740c8cfa6627d3.pdf> (accessed June 9, 2020), and Kalinowski, "Trends and Mechanisms of Corruption in South Korea."

<sup>72</sup> Kim Suk Pan, "Building National Integrity through Corruption Eradication in South Korea," in *Comparative Governance Reform in Asia: Democracy, Corruption, and Government Trust*, ed. Clay Wescott and Bidhya Bowornwathana (Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing, 2008), and Sam Youl Lee and Kwangho Jung, "Public Ethics and Anticorruption Efforts in South Korea," in *Public Administration in East Asia: Mainland China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan*, ed. Evan M. Berman, M. Jae Moon, and Choi Heungsuk (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2010).

the Korean bureaucracy have continued to decrease since democratization.<sup>73</sup> Expert assessments agree that bribery and embezzlement have been reduced significantly since the 1980s.<sup>74</sup>

Though corruption in South Korea has declined overall since democratization, elite political corruption, especially involving illicit deals with the chaebol (Korean conglomerates), continues to be a problem. There is no clearer sign of this than that every single president has been caught up in some type of corruption scandal. In 1997, Kim Young-sam was revealed to have accepted campaign donations for his 1992 run from the Hanbo Group, a large chaebol, in exchange for government approval and loans of “about \$6 billion [U.S.] for the construction of a steel mill.”<sup>75</sup> The succeeding presidents continued the tradition: Kim Dae-jung was embarrassed by his two sons’ imprisonment for accepting bribes; Roh Moo-hyun committed suicide while under investigation; and former President Lee Myung-bak was sentenced to fifteen years in prison.

The record of presidential malfeasance helps explain why Koreans remain so dissatisfied with their government’s anticorruption efforts; according to a 2017 report on perceived corruption in more than a dozen Asian countries by Transparency International, “people in South Korea were [the] *most likely* to rate their government as doing badly at stopping graft. Over three quarters rated their government badly (76 per cent) [emphasis added].”<sup>76</sup> Moreover, surveys show that corruption often tops the list of citizens’ social and political concerns.<sup>77</sup> This is despite the fact that reported experiences of corruption by the public are low. See figure 3 (below).

South Koreans’ anger at corruption is triggered by successive presidential scandals, but also has deeper roots. South Korea has changed dramatically in the last thirty or forty years. It has shot up into the ranks of the most wealthy and well-educated countries, which has shifted citizens’ demands on their government. The overriding concern with national security and anticommunism that held sway in much of society during the Cold War has faded, and the

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<sup>73</sup> You Jong-Sung, *Democracy, Inequality and Corruption: Korea, Taiwan and the Philippines Compared* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 171, and “Integrity Assessment 2017,” Anti-Corruption & Civil Rights Commission, <http://www.acrc.go.kr/en/board.do?comm and=searchDetail&method=searchDetailViewInc&menuId=020504&confId=64&conConfId=64&conTabId=0&currPageNo=1&boardNum=50201> (accessed May 1, 2020).

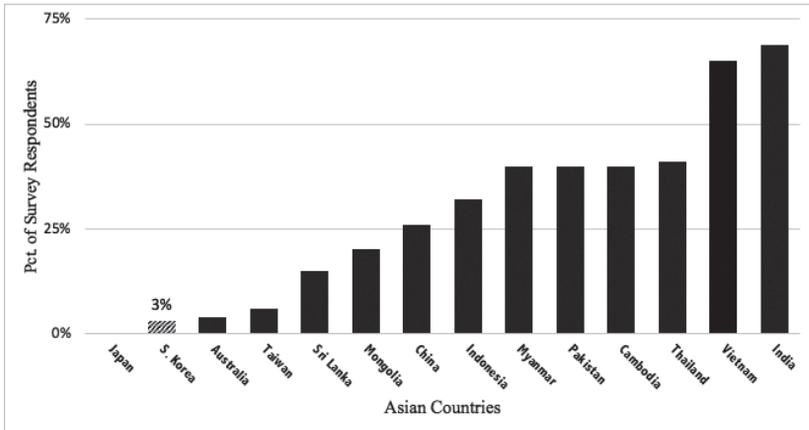
<sup>74</sup> Lee and Jung, “Public Ethics and Anticorruption Efforts in South Korea,” 409; “BTI 2014 South Korea Country Report,” Bertelsmann Transformation Index (2014), [https://www.bti-project.org/content/en/downloads/reports/country\\_report\\_2014\\_KOR.pdf](https://www.bti-project.org/content/en/downloads/reports/country_report_2014_KOR.pdf) (accessed June 9, 2020); You, *Democracy, Inequality and Corruption*, 112; and Kalinowski, “Trends and Mechanisms of Corruption in South Korea,” 628.

<sup>75</sup> Blechinger, “Report on Recent Bribery Scandals, 1996–2000,” 6.

<sup>76</sup> Transparency International, “People and Corruption: Asia Pacific,” 11.

<sup>77</sup> For example, see “국민들이 생각하는 우리사회 가장 큰 병폐는?” [What do citizens think is our society’s biggest problem?] *리얼미터* [RealMeter] (January 4, 2010), <http://www.realmeter.net/국민들이-생각하는-우리사회-가장-큰-병폐는/?ckattempt=1> (accessed May 20, 2020).

Figure 3. Paid a Bribe to a Public Service in the Last 12 Months



Data Source: “People and Corruption: Asia Pacific,” Global Corruption Barometer, Transparency International (2017): 1-38.

relationship with North Korea is now just one of many issues—often trailing far behind the economy or corruption—that motivates citizens.<sup>78</sup>

It was in the context of high public dissatisfaction with inconsistent corruption control that, in late 2016, reports surfaced which began to expose President Park’s corruption. Choi Soon-sil, a private citizen and the daughter of a Korean cult figure who had had a close relationship with Park, was discovered to have undue, “shamanlike” influence over the president. Choi and several of the president’s closest advisors had used the president’s power to extort more than \$60 million from businesses and funnel the money into two foundations they controlled.<sup>79</sup> The scandal expanded from there in different directions. Park was found to have, with the help of several top officials, siphoned millions of dollars from the National Intelligence Service into her personal accounts. Samsung’s vice president, Lee Jae-yong, was found to have paid \$36 million in bribes to Choi in return for political favors provided through Choi’s influence in the Blue House (the Korean equivalent of the American White House). And Choi was found to have pressured a top university to have her daughter admitted—a crime taken extremely seriously in a country famous

<sup>78</sup> An Honguk, “대선 의제, 경제성장·복지확대·부정부패 척결 순” [Economic growth, welfare expansion, and eradication of corruption top election agenda], *경향신문* [The Kyunghyang Daily News] (October 5, 2012), [news.khan.co.kr/kh\\_news/khan\\_art\\_view.html?artid=201210052152205&code=210100](https://news.khan.co.kr/kh_news/khan_art_view.html?artid=201210052152205&code=210100) (accessed May 20, 2020).

<sup>79</sup> Choe Sang-Hun, “Choi Soon-sil, at Center of Political Scandal in South Korea, Is Jailed,” *New York Times* (October 31, 2016), <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/01/world/asia/south-korea-park-geun-hye-choi-soon-sil.html> (accessed June 9, 2020).

for educational competition. All of this infuriated ordinary South Koreans, not least of all because Park had originally won support for her candidacy in part because of “her image as a clean leader.”<sup>80</sup> Park’s approval rating hit an all-time low of 4 percent in November.<sup>81</sup> Park’s egregious scandals had lit a fuse that ignited years of anger at seemingly intractable political corruption.

Public demonstrations calling for Park’s ouster, which began on October 29, 2016, benefited hugely from social media. Studies show that many demonstration participants came alone or in twos or threes and were not affiliated with pre-existing activist groups. Many of them had been mobilized through emotional appeals on social media.<sup>82</sup> Coverage of the demonstrations, which spread quickly on social media, then pushed more people to turn out.<sup>83</sup> Social media provided a widely available alternative to South Korea’s solidly conservative mainstream media.<sup>84</sup> South Korea has the highest rate of internet penetration in the world.<sup>85</sup>

Increasingly massive public demonstrations eventually overcame partisan divisions and put tremendous political pressure on the Blue House. Park gave emotional public apologies and fired some of her advisers, but to no avail. Crucially, many of Park’s fellow conservatives turned around and supported the Candlelight Demonstrations, leaving only small pro-Park counter-protests.<sup>86</sup> The National Assembly voted in December 2016 to impeach Park, 234 to 56—not a unanimous vote, but one that demonstrated a significant collapse of support for Park from her Saenuri Party. Studies show that polarization can make partisans ignore or downplay wrongdoing that occurs in their preferred political party.<sup>87</sup> But in this case, polarization was not strong enough to prevent the defection of nearly half of the Saenuri Party’s legislators. Conservative

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<sup>80</sup> Lee Yong Suk, “Social Media and Rigid Beliefs: Evidence from Impeachment of the President” (September 2018), p. 3, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3252932> (accessed June 9, 2020).

<sup>81</sup> Park Ju-min and Cynthia Kim, “South Korea Political Crisis Hits Park Rating, Consumer Confidence,” Reuters (November 25, 2016), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southkorea-politics-idUSKBN13K03T> (accessed June 9, 2020).

<sup>82</sup> Hee Min and Seongyi Yun, “Role of Social Media and Emotion in South Korea’s Presidential Impeachment Protests,” *Issues & Studies* 55, no. 1 (2019): 1-22.

<sup>83</sup> Lee Sangwon, “The Role of Social Media in Protest Participation: The Case of Candlelight Vigils in South Korea,” *International Journal of Communication* 12 (2018): 1523-1540.

<sup>84</sup> Kim Eun-Gyoo and James W. Hamilton, “Capitulation to Capital? OhmyNews as Alternative Media,” *Media, Culture & Society* 28, no. 4 (2006): 541-560.

<sup>85</sup> Sohn Ji-young, “Korea No. 1 Worldwide in Smartphone Ownership, Internet Penetration,” *Korea Herald* (June 24, 2018), <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20180624000197#:~:text=Korea%20was%20also%20found%20to,or%20report%20owning%20a%20smartphone> (accessed June 11, 2020).

<sup>86</sup> Lee, “Social Media and Rigid Beliefs,” 5.

<sup>87</sup> Annemarie S. Walter and David P. Redlawsk, “Voters’ Partisan Responses to Politicians’ Immoral Behavior,” *Political Psychology* 40, no. 5 (2019): 1075-1097, and Sofia Breitenstein, “Choosing the Crook: A Conjoint Experiment on Voting for Corrupt Politicians,” *Research & Politics* 6, no. 1 (2019): 1-8.

legislators likely could not face the prospect of the continuation of protests against a thoroughly discredited president in an election year. The right-leaning Constitutional Court surprised observers by unanimously upholding Park's impeachment in March 2017.<sup>88</sup> Park was later sentenced to fifteen years in prison.

President Park Geun-hye's removal did not bring an end to elite corruption in South Korea. It is too early to tell whether the new anticorruption plans announced by President Moon Jae-in (2017–current) have produced substantive improvements, but chaebol impunity remains a problem. For example, despite being convicted of bribing Park, Samsung's Lee Jae-yong was quickly released and has not lost his position in the company.<sup>89</sup> Nevertheless, the victorious Candlelight Demonstrations were a dramatic expression of civic activism and mass public engagement that neither politicians nor participants have forgotten. The Korean right-wing has not yet fully recovered from its crushing defeat, in part because a hardline group has quixotically dug in its heels with continued calls for Park's reinstatement. Korean youth are often thought to be apathetic toward politics, but for many of them the demonstrations were a first foray into political engagement, of which the participants remain proud.<sup>90</sup>

The South Korean case, though not representative of all countries, suggests some takeaways for understanding anticorruption protests in other new democracies. First, the past authoritarian period likely will shape a new democracy's ability to combat corruption. Second, public anger against corruption can build slowly and then suddenly trigger massive protests; progress is not linear. And third, public anger at corruption can even overcome political polarization.

## Conclusion

This study has examined the recent trend of national leaders increasingly being forced out of office because of accusations of corruption. Over the last fifteen years, corruption-driven leadership ousters have occurred in multiple countries in every region of the world. They have been more common in democracies than authoritarian regimes, but also have cut across regime types, ideological orientations, and cultural boundaries. Though this trend has affected countries unevenly, it shows that, overall, the political costs of engaging in corruption have risen for political incumbents. This trend has its origins, this study has argued, in global changes that began with the end of the Cold War and have

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<sup>88</sup> Lee, "Social Media and Rigid Beliefs," 6.

<sup>89</sup> "Samsung: Court Rejects Lee Jae-yong Arrest Warrant Request," *BBC News* (June 9, 2020), <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-52960676> (accessed June 9, 2020).

<sup>90</sup> Christopher Carothers, "The Turning Point for South Korean Democracy," *The Diplomat* (June 27, 2017), <https://thediplomat.com/2017/06/the-turning-point-for-south-korean-democracy/> (accessed June 9, 2020).

been accelerated by rising wealth and education, the popularization of new technologies, and other developments.

The global rise of corruption-driven political change has several implications for the future of corruption control and democracy. While ousting a corrupt president or prime minister may seem like a large advance for any country's anticorruption agenda, it rarely leads to comprehensive corruption control. Building clean government has proven difficult even in countries where nearly everyone agrees that widespread corruption is negatively affecting government and the economy. Nevertheless, leadership ousters are a positive sign that public discontent with corruption is increasingly able to effect political change, even in an era of polarization, populism, and political misinformation. Democracy is strengthened when citizens mobilize and demand greater government accountability. South Koreans' mobilizing against President Park Geun-hye in 2016–2017 is a case in point.

Finally, this study leaves many questions unanswered for future research on corruption-driven political change. Why do some popular movements against corruption dissolve after reaching their immediate political objectives, while others continue to press for systemic anticorruption reform? What makes some authoritarian regimes susceptible to popular anticorruption movements? And what can new democracies do to prevent falling into a pattern of simply replacing one corrupt leader with another?