

Corruption Allegations Batter South Korea's New President

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A corruption scandal at Samsung engulfed the government of the new South Korean president on Wednesday as his intelligence chief and top anticorruption aide faced accusations of receiving bribes from the company.

Although both Samsung and aides to President Lee Myung-bak vehemently denied the claims, the fresh allegations of corruption at the center of political power in South Korea meant further trouble for Mr. Lee, who was sworn in last month.

Mr. Lee, a business chief executive turned politician, was elected on a platform of reviving the slowing economy, but he has been dogged by allegations about his and some of his aides' ethical standards.

Three of Mr. Lee's cabinet appointees have already been forced to resign amid suspicions of corruption. Wednesday's allegations, by a former Samsung executive and a group of Roman Catholic priests, dealt a further blow to the reputation of Mr. Lee's nascent government.

"People who had collusive links with Samsung and had regularly accepted bribes from it got key posts in the new government," said the Rev. Jeon Jong-hun, a representative of the Catholic Priests' Association for Justice in a nationally televised news conference. "This is like inviting devils into the house."

He was referring to Lee Jong-chan, the top presidential anticorruption aide, and Kim Seong-ho, President Lee's choice to lead the National Intelligence Service.

Mr. Kim awaits a hearing on his appointment at the National Assembly, where opposition lawmakers are focusing on the scandal surrounding Mr. Lee's appointees to gain points for the parliamentary elections in April.

The Catholic group, which led pro-democracy actions against the military dictators who once ruled the country, was speaking on behalf of the Samsung whistle-blower, Kim Yong-chul, the company's former legal adviser.

Mr. Kim, who was Samsung's chief in-house lawyer for seven years, until 2004, has been claiming that Samsung runs a vast network of bribery through the government, the judiciary branch and the news media and that he himself bribed prosecutors on behalf of Samsung and its chairman, Lee Kun-hee.

The presidential office called the allegations against Lee Myung-bak's aides "groundless."

"Common sense tells us that a whistle-blower should present evidence," said the presidential spokesman, Lee Dong-kwan, criticizing Mr. Kim and the priests for not corroborating their claims on Wednesday. "The situation we have is like a man calling another 'crazy' and then challenging him to prove he is not crazy."

A spokesman for Samsung said "those who make these absurd, groundless allegations must be held responsible for them."

But Woo Sang-ho, spokesman for the United Democratic Party, the main opposition party, said the allegations, coupled with the earlier resignations of cabinet appointees, revealed serious deficiencies in Mr. Lee's ability to check the backgrounds of his aides. Mr. Woo urged the two officials at the center of the allegations to resign.

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