

The Apology for Political Scandal: Park Geun-hye's Three National Conversations

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Abstract. A reasonable apology is very important to the political scandal. Due to the particularity of the political event, we should pay attention to the time, attitude and content of apologizing. This article will focus on the improper apologies of political figures, taking Park's Choi case as an example to analyze the importance of apology and the wording and attitude of apology. Choi incident is an important event in South Korean politics, which led to the first impeachment among Korean presidents. Park Geun-hye's three national talks on the incident revealed the wording, timing, and expression that politicians should pay heed to in the course of apologizing when facing scandals.

1. Introduction

In response to the political scandal, Park Geun-hye made three national conversations about her best friend Choi's interference in political activities. The first national conversation fell flat and immediately turned into a crisis of trust among citizens. To make amendments for her political scandal and the inappropriate apology, Park delivered the second national conversation full of emotion. Although she tried her best to make up for the scandal, it was difficult to be forgiven because the first national conversation had messed things up. She mentioned leaving the Blue House in the last national conversation. At this time, the worst punishment for her was far from enough to arise her approval rating. Analysis of Park's three apologies suggests the important factors for the apologetic discourse about a political scandal: duration, context, and expression. This essay explains how these three elements affect the most important data to a political leader: the national support data.

2. The review of the whole event

On October 24, 2016, South Korea's JTBC TV reported that the former South Korean President Park Geun-hye's confidant Choi was involved in intervention and corruption in political activities, including diplomatic, cultural and economic policies. This report aroused widespread controversy from Korean citizens and erupted the largest parade in Korea's history. Park Geun-hye delivered national speeches for three times on this political scandal. The first speech was delivered on October 25th after the JTBC report, the second time on November 4th, taking the longest time, and the third time on November 29, during which she resigned from the post of the presidency for the first time. However, despite Park's repeated public apologies, the approval rating has continued to plummet and eventually she was impeached. There is no doubt that South Korea's citizens don't trust the government.

Park tried to explain her relationship with Choi when she apologized for the first time. She did not specify when she stopped soliciting opinions from Ms. Choi, nor did she mention rumors that she was involved in corruption. In her second apology, Park repeated her explanation of her relationship with Choi, showing her reluctance to step down and seeking public understanding. The biggest "novelty" in the third apology was the resignation, with conditions and procedures to be negotiated between the ruling and opposition parties. In a similar vein to the previous two statements, she once again stressed that she had been drawn into politics for 18 years without any self-interest and that her biggest mistake was negligence. Continuing her apology, Park repeated the "partial acknowledgment" of her previous

two speeches, denied her substantive responsibility in the incident and hoped to gain national understanding and support for maintaining political stability.

Through Gallup Korea Daily Opinion [1], we conclude that Park Geun-hye's national approval rating data was falling until reaching the lowest rate of 4% after the news about Choi and corruption scandal was reported. Although Park delivered three national speeches, the approval rating was still falling. As a political leader, Park and Bill Clinton both made huge scandal while in office. For example, Mark Glantz [2] wrote that Koesten and Rowland [3] examined the apology about the Cold War-era radiation experiment which also caused a sensation in the world. Clinton had to apologize for his mistake. Citizens did not accept the first two apologies because they thought the discourse was too irregular to forgive him and the government. However, Clinton's third apology became more logical and systematic so citizens chose to forgive. Eventually, Clinton got the chance to remain in the seat. This case is a successful apology for political scandal, but Park was not as lucky as Clinton due to the different impacts American and Korean cultures made on their citizens' attitudes to politics. Another reason is that Park made a wrong apology plan.

3. The analysis on three apologies

3.1 The first national conversation

The first national conversation goes like the following:

"I heard a lot of opinions during the election, and Choi helped me when I was in trouble. In the last presidential election, she offered recommendations to me mainly in the field of publicity and speech, and I also heard some suggestions since I took office. But Choi quit after the establishment of the Blue House secretarial team."



Fig.1. The first national apology

After the reports of the cronyism and scandals, Park Geun-hye was pressured by public opinions, she first apologized to the citizens through live television broadcasts on October 25, 2016, acknowledging the existence of the scandal. The national speech lasted for 1 minute 49 seconds. Park Geun-hye tried to explain Choi's review of the president's speech and admitted that after the establishment of the Blue House secretarial group, she stopped seeking help from Choi [4]. While apologizing to the citizens, Park Geun-hye did not explain the specific time when she stopped asking for advice from Choi, nor did she mention rumors of corruption.

The whole speech of Park Geun-hye contained little expression. Teun A. van Dijk [5] wrote that expression structure plays an indirect factor to influence modes of attention and understanding of what they say following the principles of the ideological square. While reading the manuscript, Park was almost expressionless so this apology did not achieve good results. Instead, it further aroused national anger because of her attitude of indifference. Due to the mistake, this apology did not restore the image of Park Geun-hye and the approval rating continued to fall. According to a survey released by the Korea Daily Daily's joint public opinion survey agency on October 28th [1], only 14% of the people believed that Park Geun-hye's government "has performed its duties well", which is the lowest value since Park Geun-hye's administration; the proportion of people who think that Park Geun-hye's government performs "very bad" is as high as 74%.

Zheng Hanlu, a professor of political diplomacy at Korea University, analyzed the report of the "First Financial Daily": "In general, the president's apology for a storm will attract supporters' small-

scale “collection effect” to support the rate. There is a short-term rise; but Park Geun-hye’s apology led to a further decline of the approval rate, proving that the apology did not achieve the expected results. ” An apology addressed properly will unexpectedly achieve political goals and make the approval rate rise. However, due to Park Geun-hye’s perfunctory attitude, many people thought that it was not a sincere apology, therefore ignited the public’s anger. The likelihood of an insincere apology in political life is greater than in other areas[6]. ” Meanwhile, many senior officials in Blue House were defending Park Geun-hye with the "President is also a victim" argument while the media was still revealing more details, further stimulating the people's distrust of Park Geun-hye's government."[7].

Korean students from many universities have posted posters in schools and issued a “Declaration of the Current Situation” to denounce Park Geun-hye and Choi. The Korean Foreign Studies University has posted a slogan of 10 languages uniquely to let the people all over the world "evaluate". Professors from many universities have also issued declarations, calling on Park Geun-hye to step down and establish a neutral cabinet. On the Internet, there is also a "Fifty-Korean Overseas Chinese urging President Park to step down” project, saying that "the president has become a fit of personal jealousy. This fact is well known throughout the world; this is a major crime and national shame that has brought the country into the abyss."

According to the national approval rate and the news response, Park Geun-hye’s first apology was undoubtedly a failure. It did not satisfy the public’s answer to the political scandal. It was a failed political apology. However, Park Geun-hye did not realize that this incident would be an important reason for her impeachment. The measures taken by Park Geun-hye at this time were nothing more than a superficial effort, a decision that has to be made in the face of public criticism. Without expressions, she took it simply as an obligation.

3.2 The second national conversation

At this time, Park mentioned some political events she was involved in, such as cults and related investigations, and the speech made three apologies:

“...and I heard that Choi had done a lot of illegal things, and I felt sorry and heavy, all of which was my mistake, my fault caused the present situation, I have a lot of pain in the sense of responsibility...and I have an obligation to explain the truth and the responsibility to the national, and I will do my best to give the best assistance, An instruction to assist in the investigation has now been issued to the chamber and the guard, and, if necessary, my individual will also be assisted in the investigation by the prosecution service, and I will also be fully engaged when a special investigation is required.”



Fig.2. The second national apology

Apologies are even more difficult in an organizational context [8]. That’s why Park needs the second and sincerer apology because the first one is apparently without systematically deliberate thinking and organization when considering whether and how to apologize. Another point is that despite the scandal made by Choi, there was still many critics of the government. That’s why the organizational apology is so important, just like a company [8]. A company’s mistake is often made by a single division of an employee, and a bad situation is frequently made worse by events beyond their control. It feels unjust for a CEO or an entire team to take responsibility.

In this national speech, Park Geun-hye expressed her willingness to accept the investigation by the prosecution if necessary. Park Geun-hye repeated her explanation of her relationship with Choi and continued to apologize, indicating her unwillingness to step down. It lasted for 9 minutes and 10 seconds, the longest time in three conversations. Park Geun-hye wanted to make up for the mistakes through this apology and retrieve the approval rate. However, most people have lost their trust in the Park Geun-hye government during the first improper apology. Besides, more and more reports began to expose other political scandals of Park Geun-hye. The approval rate was the lowest in the calendar year, and although the second speech was sincerer, it still failed to restore national trust.

Fully aware of the seriousness of the situation, Park Geun-hye wanted to earn national sympathy through tears, because she would leave the presidency once she lost this opportunity. As a "marriage to the country", the abandonment of the presidency is undoubtedly the worst choice, so Park Geun-hye began to show sincerity and regret. However, with a strong sense of nationality, it is impossible for Korean citizens to simply forgive because of an apology (the Korean political mission is strong through the outcome of the previous presidents of South Korea), and the apology has caused the citizens to lose their sense of freshness. Therefore, this apology did not arouse big waves.

3.3 The last national conversation

At this time, Park spoke mainly about her political life and her final struggle with it: all she did was for the country. This time the expression was much easier than the second time as if she had dropped everything, just waiting for the result:

I have been agonizing over many nights what would be the right path for the country as conditions at home and overseas worsen. Now, I would like to reveal my decision. I will leave the matters about my fate, including the shortening of my presidential term, to be decided by the National Assembly. If the ruling and opposition parties discuss and come up with a plan to reduce the confusion in state affairs and ensure a safe transfer of governments, I will step down from the presidential position under that schedule and by processes stated in the law.



Fig.3.The last national apology

On November 29th, Park Geun-hye issued a live TV national dialogue for the third time in Blue House and apologized again to the friend Choi's political scandal. Unlike the previous two apologies, she mentioned her resignation but said that it was to be decided by Congress. Park Geun-hye said that she had let go of everything and only hoped that the Republic of Korea would escape the confusion and get back on track as soon as possible.

In a dramatic move that shifted the burden of resolving the crisis engulfing her presidency, Park required the parliament on Tuesday to decide how and when she should quit, which opposition lawmakers dismissed as a ploy to buy time and avoid impeachment. There is not even any confession and introspection. Many Korean people said they could not accept the speech. There are some comments on Youtube: Be punished, not an apology! You have to pay for the crime. (@윤일환) Shut up and get down now! Don't play tricks! (@Yoo Kim). In other words, Park Geun-hye, as the most important politician in Korea at the time, should not just repeat the apology when confronting the Choi scandal. There was a serious scandal, indicating that the politicians themselves and even the entire political team have certain. They should first solve the problems in these political systems. Van de Walle, Steven (2008) mentioned Belgium has had an image of being a corrupt country for a long

time [9][10]. We will show that general perceptions of corruption should not be seen as an expression of individual experience. Davis and John (2003) also mentioned that Koreans have a strong feeling of nationalism because of their long-time culture. As Van de Walle said, in the face of such a scandal, the government should focus more on system rectification than on Park Geun-hye's apology. Meanwhile, Korean culture affects citizens to view political events with a critical attitude. According to the four dimensions, he attributes Korea to uncertainty avoidance. Uncertainty avoidance refers to the extent to which people in a society feel threatened by ambiguous situations and, therefore, try to avoid ambiguous situations in providing greater certainty and predictability. Societies high in uncertainty avoidance have norms, values, and beliefs like laws are very important; deviant people and ideas should not be tolerated; experts and authorities are usually correct, and conflict should be avoided. These societies tend to socialize their members to "beat" the future because they feel more anxious toward the future that is unpredictable [11]. Countries high in uncertainty avoidance such as Korea perceive a need for rules and regulations and have a strong sense of nationalism.

There is no doubt that the third apology for Park Geun-hye is of great significance. This is because she knows that resignation is the best choice in the current situation. Otherwise, Congress will also impeach her. Losing all the privilege of retirement is not as good as leaving. This is also the last bargaining chip of Park Geun-hye. In the case of 4% support at that time, there were many voices demanding impeachment, and taking the initiative to leave will soften part of the attitudes.

4. Conclusion

This essay is supported by the Gallup Korea Daily Opinion's data to illustrate the political leader Park's failure of apology discourse. Park Geun-hye's Choi incident suggests the timing, attitude, and content of a political apology. First of all, with regard to attitude, Park Geun-hye, faced with her national apology in Choi's case, has always been defending herself: all she has done is for the country. She didn't express the attitude of making up, especially in the first national conversation. Reading the speech without emotion and shirking responsibility directly angered the nation, leading to a sharp decline in approval ratings and the damage to the government's image. Secondly, concerning time, when the first apology did not achieve the goal of appeasing the people, Park Geun-hye issued a second, relatively "sincere" apology, taking responsibility for her negligence. The second apology, though more comprehensive, did not change much because it missed the opportunity to apologize for the first time. Finally, the contents of Park Geun-hye's first two apologies are very different, from admitting negligence to clearly explaining the events, the random and simple content has a counter-productive effect on the contrary. Observed from these three aspects, political apologies need to be considered in many ways, not just on the scandal itself. Besides, South Korea is also a country with strong nationalism and this feeling urges citizens to question the government and show zero tolerance to the scandal. The public distrust caused by scandals is multifaceted. Therefore, in the face of political scandals, apologies need to pay attention to the right time, a sincere attitude and content that dispels the suspicion of the people.

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