

South Korean president impeached, suspended from office

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South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol was impeached on Saturday for declaring martial law on the evening of December 3-4. Yoon's powers have been suspended and his case will now go to the Constitutional Court, which has 180 days to decide whether or not he will be removed from office.

The impeachment motion passed the 300-seat National Assembly with 204 lawmakers voting in favour, 85 in opposition, three abstentions, and eight invalid votes. The motion required a two-thirds majority to pass. Prime Minister Han Duck-soo, appointed by Yoon, has taken over as acting president.

Yoon has already been booked as a criminal suspect on charges including insurrection, failed to appear in court, reportedly failed to appear as summoned on Sunday and faces the possibility of arrest. If he is removed from power, a presidential election must be held within 60 days.

The opposition bloc, led by the Democratic Party (DP), submitted the motion to impeach Yoon last Thursday. It was the second such motion after the first failed on December 7 when the ruling People Power Party (PPP) boycotted the vote and prevented a quorum from being reached.

The opposition bloc is comprised of the DP, which controls 170 seats, five minor parties, and two nominal independents. The ruling PPP holds 108 seats, meaning 12 PPP members crossed party lines to vote for impeachment. As Yoon is from the PPP, the party is granted ruling party status despite being a parliamentary minority.

That the PPP allowed the vote to proceed indicates there are concerns within the party that keeping Yoon in office would lead to the growth of protests and strikes and destabilise bourgeois rule. A Gallup Korea poll last week showed 75 percent of the public supports Yoon's impeachment, a statistic mirrored in numerous other surveys.

Both the right-wing PPP and so-called "progressive" DP want to shut down protests as quickly as possible to prevent workers and youth from drawing the connections between Yoon's authoritarianism, deteriorating living conditions and the underlying crisis of capitalism.

Despite the Democrats' posturing, when in power the party has been just as ruthless as the conservatives in imposing the demands of the big business. Hostility to the Democrats paved the way for Yoon to come to office in 2022 after five years of Democrat president Moon Jae-in.

The PPP had pushed for Yoon's "orderly resignation," which he flatly rejected in a belligerent speech Thursday. Yoon denounced parliament, saying, "The National Assembly, dominated by the large opposition party, has become a monster that destroys the Constitutional order of liberal democracy."

He also declared that martial law falls "within the realm of executive authority, which is not subject to judicial review" and claimed that the dispatching of troops to the National Assembly on December 3 was meant to "maintain order."

In reality, the military and police were dispatched to arrest lawmakers and prevent the vote on lifting martial law, which took place early December 4. Constitutionally, parliament can require the president to lift martial law with a simple majority. All 190 lawmakers present at time unanimously voted to do so.

National Police Agency chief Jo Ji-ho, who was detained last Wednesday, told investigators that he had received orders to block entry to parliament for all but the military as well as to track the locations of at least 15 of Yoon's political opponents for arrest.

In separate testimony last week, Lieutenant General Gwak Jong-geun, the head of the Army Special Warfare Command [now relieved of duties], stated that Yoon ordered him to send troops to "break down the doors [at the National Assembly], and go in and drag out the people inside." Rather than Yoon's coup being doomed from the start, had the military been quicker, South Korea would now likely be under martial law.

Like last week, a massive protest also took place Saturday outside the National Assembly in Seoul, demanding Yoon's removal from office. Approximately two million people from around the country demonstrated, double the number last week, according to organizers. Police placed total

attendance at 208,000. Protesters also gathered in other cities, including an estimated 30,000 in Daegu and 10,000 in Jeonju.

Demonstrations have also been held around South Korea on a daily basis. They have also taken place abroad in the United States, Germany, Australia, Japan, and other countries.

In Seoul on Saturday, Kim, a 37-year-old office worker, told *JoongAng Ilbo* before the impeachment motion passed, “Democracy is dead. How can they not impeach Yoon even after soldiers pointed guns at civilians? ... It seems that Yoon doesn’t care about the people of our nation at all.”

Many expressed a sense of relief after the news of Yoon’s impeachment was announced. Lee, a 75-year-old protester, told the *Korea Times*, “I have been so scared this week, thinking we’re going back to the 1980s when martial law broke out. From today’s result, I know that we have earned a true democracy indeed.”

However, Yoon’s impeachment does not mean the threat to democratic rights is over. This attack did not begin with Yoon or emerge as a result of his personal predilection for authoritarianism. It is, above all, part of international processes. In country after country, the ruling classes are turning to fascist and authoritarian forms of rule amid a deepening social and economic crisis that is fuelling the class struggle. In the US, the fascist Trump is about to assume the presidency, while far right and fascist parties are in government or assuming prominence in much of Europe and elsewhere.

In South Korea, workers and youth face falling real wages and growing social inequality, making Yoon deeply unpopular. According to the International Labour Organization, real wages in South Korea dropped by 0.2 percent in 2022, 1.3 percent in 2023, and are expected to fall a further 0.5 percent this year. The number of strikes has also grown the past year, with auto parts and railway workers walking off the job in recent weeks. Significantly, workers at Samsung Electronics struck for the first time in the company’s history in July.

Seoul has also been a strong supporter of US imperialism, including backing the US/NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and Israel’s genocide of the Palestinians, causing devastation throughout the Middle East. Escalating South Korea’s involvement in these conflicts and US-led preparations for war against China was no doubt also a factor in Yoon’s imposition of martial law, given widespread popular anti-war sentiment.

There is no guarantee that the Constitutional Court will remove Yoon from office. The court is not a neutral arbiter but part of the capitalist state, concerned above all with the preservation of bourgeois rule. Typically comprised of nine

judges, there are three empty seats on the court. Legally, seven justices must hear the case, though this requirement was suspended in October in relation to a separate case. Six of nine justices must vote to remove a president from office.

Confirmation hearings for the three vacancies are now slated for Wednesday. Judges are appointed by the president, the Supreme Court, and the National Assembly, with each allowed three selections. Two of the justices were appointed by the previous president, Moon. Another was selected by Yoon. The remaining three were recommended by the Supreme Court, which Yoon approved. The National Assembly will put forward two justices selected by the DP and a third chosen by the PPP.

In the aftermath of Saturday’s impeachment vote, Yoon flatly declared that he would “never give up” and described his impeachment as a “temporary” pause of his presidency. One factor in the Constitutional Court’s deliberations and those in ruling circles will be the extent to which the popular outrage and anger at Yoon’s attempt to wind the clock back decades to the brutal US-backed military dictatorships of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s dissipates.

In this, the determination of the opposition Democrats and its trade unions allies in confining protests and strikes within the framework of the parliament and the courts will only encourage attempts to keep Yoon in office.

Democrat leader Lee Jae-myung has offered to work with the government to keep a lid on popular protests. In a televised news conference, he called for a rapid court ruling in order to “minimise national confusion and the suffering of people,” adding, “The Democratic party will actively cooperate with all parties to stabilise state affairs and restore international trust.”

Whether or not Yoon is finally removed from office, the underlying economic and social crisis will continue to fuel political instability and the resort by the ruling class to anti-democratic methods to impose new burdens on working class.



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