

2 coup attempts: Ex-South Korean president jailed, while Trump sits in office

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The Seoul Central District Court in South Korea on Thursday sentenced former President Yoon Suk-yeol to life in prison for his failed military coup on the evening of December 3, 2024. A president who launched a violent attack on the country's legislature with the intent of seizing power and overturning the constitution now faces the prospect of spending the rest of his life behind bars.

While Yoon sits in jail, in the United States, the world's supposed leading democracy, Donald Trump, a gangster, convicted felon and fascist sits in the White House, more than five years after launching his own violent coup attempt to seize control of Congress and overturn the constitution in an attempt to stay in power following the November 2020 election.

The treatment of these two criminals, in particular that of Trump by the Democratic Party, holds significant lessons for workers in the US and internationally.

The South Korean court characterized Yoon's declaration of martial law on the night of December 3 as an insurrection while the special prosecutors trying the case even recommended the death penalty. Several of Yoon's accomplices in the military and police establishment also received significant jail terms. This includes former Defense Minister Kim Yong-hyun, who received a 30-year prison sentence; former National Police Agency Chief Cho Ji-ho, 12 years; and former Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency Chief Kim Bong-sik, 10 years.

Presiding Judge Ji Gwi-yeon stated, "Former President Yoon planned the crime personally and in a leading role, and involved many people in the crime. The emergency martial law incurred an enormous social cost, and the defendant hardly expressed an apology for that."

Yoon's coup attempt was the culmination of months of preparation. He dispatched troops to the National Assembly to arrest lawmakers, including leaders of both his then-ruling People Power Party and the main opposition Democratic Party. This was done to prevent them from exercising their legal ability to vote to overturn the martial law declaration, which they would do. The court made clear that it was not

convicting Yoon over the martial law declaration itself, but rather the dispatching of troops to parliament.

Judge Ji stated, "It is difficult to deny that former President Yoon inwardly aimed to make the National Assembly unable to function properly for a considerable period by blocking and paralyzing the National Assembly's activities by means of sending troops to the National Assembly to seal it off and arrest key politicians." He added, "It is also recognized that he staged a riot by sending in the military."

Mass protests as well as a growing strike movement broke out in response to Yoon's coup attempt. On December 14, 2024, the president was impeached and suspended from office. He was arrested in January while still technically the president and ultimately removed from office in a unanimous decision by the Constitutional Court last April. Lee Jae-myung of the Democratic Party came to office in a special election shortly afterwards.

Yoon was impeached, arrested, removed from office, and sentenced to life behind bars in the space of less than 15 months. For attempting to overthrow the rule of law, Yoon now joins a list of former South Korean presidents imprisoned for crimes while in office, including Chun Doo-hwan, Noh Tae-woo, Lee Myung-bak, and Park Geun-hye.

Why is it then that South Korea's Yoon sits in jail while Trump sits in the White House? As the *World Socialist Web Site* has described, Trump's January 6, 2021 coup served as a watershed moment in international politics, not only signifying a turning point in US politics but also serving as a model for figures like Yoon.

In contrast to Yoon's coup plotting, which took place largely in secret, Trump carried out his actions in full view of the public, making it clear he would not accept the results of the 2020 election if he lost and then promoting the "big lie" of the stolen election after Joe Biden's victory. Throughout this period, Trump whipped up an atmosphere of violence against his political opponents. He then organized a mob of far-right fascists to attack Congress on January 6 with the intent of seizing and killing elected

representatives to keep Trump in office.

Trump has not been held accountable for his actions in the slightest, whether in relation to the coup attempt or any of the other crimes he has committed, including his illegal attacks on Venezuela and Iran and the terrorizing of the population through the ICE gestapo. This is not due to the political prowess of Trump or the strength and support he commands; quite the contrary. Trump is a widely reviled figure in the US and internationally.

Yet the US Democrats have not offered any serious opposition to this fascist agenda. Even now as Trump assembles an armada in the Middle East in preparation for what have been called “sustained, weeks-long operations” against Iran, there has not a single voice of opposition from the Democrats, let alone debate in Congress, which alone has the constitutional ability to declare war. This is not accidental, but a sign of the Democrats’ consent for yet another criminal imperialist conflict.

At the same time, South Korea is no paragon of democratic values. For four decades it was ruled by dictators, first the US puppet Syngman Rhee and then under the military dictatorship first established in a coup led by Park Chung-hee.

The façade of democracy that exists today was built on the scaffolding of this dictatorship. The military retains a strong influence behind the scenes as well as close connections to Washington, as does much of the South Korean state. Yet even the Democrats, who descend from the loyal opposition to Rhee and Park, today felt compelled to act against Yoon to pay lip service to “democracy.”

The South Korean Democrats and the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions worked to dissipate the mass movement that was developing. They seemingly gave support to protests that were called to give the impression that they were actively fighting against Yoon’s attack on democracy. The decision to do so, and ultimately to remove Yoon, was meant to protect the state itself and prevent people from drawing conclusions about the necessity to break with the capitalist system.

Yet the US Democrats and the trade unions do not even go this far, instead bowing and scraping before the fascist in the White House, demonstrating how far even bourgeois democracy has degenerated in the US.

It is not the person of Trump whom the Democrats bow before, but the oligarchy he represents and that dominates political and economic life. Any action taken against Trump would be seen as an infringement on the oligarchy’s ability to extract profits from the working class and to wage wars overseas in pursuit of their imperialist interests.

Therefore, the Democrats assure Trump of their bipartisan support while passing his budgets, including to fund the

military and ICE. The Democrats are conscious that any movement against Trump, even in a limited form, could easily turn into a larger mass movement out of their control and that of their allies in the trade unions.

During its four years in office, the Biden administration refused to take any serious actions to hold Trump accountable. Legal actions against Trump were filed largely over secondary issues while the government took its time in bringing charges against the then-former president for his role in the January 6 coup, charges that were ultimately dropped after he was reelected. No charges were brought against Trump for insurrection.

Instead, the Biden administration and the Democrats paved the way for Trump to return to office by focusing their attention on the agenda of US imperialism for which it needed the Republican Party’s support, in particular waging war against Russia in Ukraine and ensuring Washington’s full-backing for Israel’s genocide in Gaza. Trump capitalized on this as well as the Democrats’ arrogant indifference to the devastating impact of inflation on workers’ living standards.

The Democratic Party in the US claims that nothing can be done to stop Trump aside from waiting for the next elections, if they are even held. Yet protests and growing public outrage towards the events in Minnesota last month demonstrated the strength of the working class, forcing the Trump administration into a tactical retreat. But what frightens the Trump administration also frightens the Democrats, that is the development of a mass working class movement against the capitalist system itself.

Despite its limitations, the jailing of South Korea’s Yoon exposes the lie that nothing can be done. It also exposes the fact that no opposition to Trump, even in limited forms, will come from the Democrats or any section of the US political establishment. Instead, the fight against Trump and the oligarchy that both he and the Democrats defend must come through a movement of the working class.



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