

South Korean president attempts to impose martial law

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South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol yesterday launched what was tantamount to a military coup. On national television at about 10.25 p.m., he announced a martial law decree, banning strikes, protests and all political activity and imposing blanket censorship. After facing immediate protests and opposition in the National Assembly, Yoon announced around 4:30 a.m. today that he would lift martial law and that troops dispatched to enforce the decree had been withdrawn.

Yoon justified his sweeping anti-democratic measures in the name of eradicating “pro-North Korean forces” and protecting “the constitutional order of freedom.” He declared that “we will protect and rebuild a liberal Republic of Korea, which is falling into the abyss of national ruin,” and accused the opposition Democratic Party (DP) of including “anti-state forces who are the main culprits of national ruin and who have committed heinous acts up until now.”

The immediate cause of Yoon’s move to impose military dictatorship is the political standoff between Yoon as president and the National Assembly, which, since the general election in April, is controlled by the DP and allies that hold 170 seats in the 300-seat body. Yoon’s People Power Party (PPP), which holds just 108 seats, nevertheless has ruling party status.

Political warfare has come to a head over the Democrats’ efforts to stall and cut back Yoon’s proposed budget. Yoon also denounced the opposition for carrying out impeachment proceedings against numerous figures in his government, including recently the head of the state audit agency and the chief prosecutor in Seoul.

Kim Yong-hyun, who was appointed defence minister on September 2, reportedly proposed martial law to Yoon. Kim has previously held high positions within the military, rising to the rank of three-star general in the army before retiring in 2017. He is close to Yoon, serving as an advisor in the past on military issues.

Under martial law, all political activities would be illegal, including the operation of the National Assembly, any work

by political parties, and demonstrations. Strikes and other forms of workers’ protests would also be illegal. The media would be under the control of the martial law government.

Following Yoon’s declaration last night, thousands of protesters quickly gathered outside the National Assembly, many demanding Yoon’s arrest. Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) leader Yang Gyeong-su announced, “Starting with the KCTU central executive committee press conference at 8 a.m. on the 4th, we will go on an indefinite general strike until the Yoon Seok-yeol administration resigns.”

Democratic Party leader Lee Jae-myung called on parliamentarians to meet and vote to end martial law. The head of Yoon’s own party, Han Dong-hoon, publicly declared that the martial law decree was “wrong.” Under South Korea’s constitution, a majority vote in the National Assembly requires the president to lift martial law.

Parliamentary aides blockaded doors as military personnel smashed windows to gain entry to the National Assembly in an attempt to arrest Lee, Han, and National Assembly Speaker U Won-sik. If that had been successful, the situation today would be very different.

At 1:00 a.m., 190 lawmakers were present and unanimously voted to lift Yoon’s martial law, including 172 opposition legislators and 18 PPP members. Speaker U Won-sik declared martial law “null and void” and called on soldiers and police to leave the building. He declared shortly after that no military personnel remained in the building.

Yoon and the military were silent for more than three hours before announcing that martial law would be lifted and that troops had been withdrawn. The Democrats have now announced that if Yoon does not voluntarily resign, they will pursue his impeachment.

The political crisis that led to Yoon’s declaration of martial law is far from over. Dictatorship, which has a long history in South Korea, continues to loom large. The lengthy delay in responding to the parliamentary vote was not out of any consideration of constitutional niceties, but fears in ruling circles that Yoon’s precipitous actions would trigger

an outpouring of popular opposition, particularly from the working class.

Workers and youth cannot rely on the Democrats and their trade union allies to prevent another coup attempt. The opposition party and the KCTU have demonstrated time and again that their overriding concern is not the social and democratic rights of working people, but the defence of South Korean capitalism. In power, the Democrats, no less than their rightwing rivals, have made deep inroads into the social position of the working class, aided and abetted by the KCTU, which has confined and sabotaged strikes and protests.

The resort to martial law was not simply the product of the individual psyche of the president, but stems from the crisis of South Korean and global capitalism. Around the world, rapidly deteriorating living standards, the staggering growth of social inequality and the plunge towards world war are fuelling strikes, mass protests and a political radicalization among workers and young people. Increasingly, in country after country, the ruling class is dispensing with the trappings of democracy and adopting extreme anti-democratic measures. The very advanced character of the crisis is expressed most clearly in the United States—the centre of world imperialism—where the fascist Donald Trump is about to be installed in power.

South Korea, the world's 13th largest economy, is no exception. Indeed, there is a distinct echo of Trump's lashing out at "the enemy within" in Yoon's anti-communist diatribe used to justify his declaration of martial law. Real wages are falling as prices increase, making it harder and harder for workers to make ends meet and leading to acute social tensions. Yoon has backed and militarily aided the US-NATO war in Ukraine against Russia and is integrating South Korea into the accelerating US-led preparations for war against China.

As a result, Yoon is widely despised. His approval rating has fallen as low as 17 percent. One poll last month found that 58.3 percent of respondents wanted Yoon out of office. On November 30, approximately 100,000 demonstrators marched in Seoul to demand his resignation. The Democrats, the KCTU and various civic groups in the DP's orbit all participated.

Since coming to office in May 2022, Yoon has regularly denounced his political opponents in vitriolic, anti-communist terms, accusing them of sympathizing or even taking orders from North Korea. During a major strike of truck drivers at the end of 2022, Yoon denounced the protracted stoppage for better wages and working conditions as "similar to the North Korean nuclear threat."

This week, several unions affiliated with the KCTU planned to strike or hold protests, including of rail and

subway workers. The unions involved represent approximately 70,000 workers. Workers belonging to the KCTU-affiliated Korean Railway Workers' Union were set to strike on December 5, while Seoul subway workers were planning to walk off the job the following day. Non-regular education workers were also planning to stop work on December 6. Truck drivers belonging to Cargo Truckers Solidarity held a two-day strike on December 2-3. Workers at the National Pension Service and the Korea Gas Corporation also planned to strike this week.

In addition, auto parts workers at Hyundai Transys from the Korean Metal Workers' Union (KMWU) held a one month-long strike beginning in October. The KMWU, one of the most influential unions in the KCTU, came under huge pressure from big business and Yoon's government after the strike led to the shutdown of lines at Hyundai Motors.

The South Korean ruling class is no stranger to trampling on the democratic rights of the working class. Martial law was last declared in 1979 following the assassination of military dictator Park Chung-hee. It was expanded the following year when Chun Doo-hwan carried out his own coup. The military subsequently conducted mass repression against protesters, most infamously in the city of Gwangju, where upwards of 2,000 people were massacred.

The declaration of martial law demonstrates that despite the so-called democratization that took place following mass protests in the 1980s and early 1990s, the South Korean state still rests on the anti-communist, dictatorial foundations established by US imperialism after World War II through its puppet Syngman Rhee regime, later strengthened under Park.

Yoon's attempted coup is a serious warning to the South Korean and international working class. In the midst of worsening crises, autocratic methods of rule are the order of the day for the ruling classes around the world. The defence of democratic rights is completely bound up with the independent mobilization of the working class on a socialist perspective to put an end to the outmoded capitalist system that is the root cause of war, austerity and dictatorship.



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