

Impeachment against South Korean president over martial law fails

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The impeachment of South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol over his abortive attempt to impose martial law last week failed after lawmakers from Yoon's right-wing People Power Party (PPP) boycotted the vote on Saturday evening.

While holding a majority of 190 in the 300-seat National Assembly, the opposition Democratic Party and its allies fell short of the two-thirds majority needed for a quorum and to approve the impeachment of the president. Just three members of the ruling PPP were present at the time.

Amid widespread popular opposition and protests demanding the president be impeached or resign over his attempted coup, PPP leaders have cobbled together a rotten deal to keep Yoon in office, temporarily at least.

In a joint appearance yesterday, Prime Minister Han Duck-soo and PPP leader Han Dong-hoon declared that Yoon would “not be involved in handling state affairs, including diplomacy” as his cabinet sought to negotiate an “orderly exit.”

As part of these backroom negotiations, Yoon made a nationally-televised formal apology on Saturday morning, declaring his martial law decree was made out of “desperation” and promised not to make another. While saying he would not avoid the legal and political responsibility for his actions, Yoon did not offer to resign.

South Korean prosecutors have confirmed that an investigation has been opened against Yoon on charges of treason and abuse of power. Yesterday they arrested former defence minister Kim Yong-hyun, who is accused of playing a central role in planning and executing martial law. Interior minister Lee Sang-min, who is also heavily implicated in the coup attempt, resigned yesterday.

Three minor opposition parties had filed a complaint against Yoon, Kim and martial law commander Park An-su, accusing them of insurrection.

None of the fundamental political issues is resolved, however. Despite the PPP's claims that it is engineering an “orderly exit,” Yoon remains in office. Moreover, while the PPP declares that the president will no longer play a part in state affairs—an arrangement that has no legal or constitutional standing—Yoon retains all the presidential powers, including to impose martial law for a second time.

The PPP and Yoon are biding time, in part to prepare for a presidential election which must be held within 60 days in the event that Yoon is compelled to resign or is impeached. At the same time, the president will be watching the extent of the protests and strikes to determine whether it is possible to cling to office, one way or another.

Yoon announced martial law late Tuesday night, establishing the basis for a military dictatorship. The regime quickly outlawed all political activity, imposed blanket censorship, banned industrial action and ordered striking doctors back to work. Amid a political standoff with the opposition-controlled National Assembly, the president denounced the Democrats and their allies in anti-communist terms as North Korean agents.

The National Assembly met in the early hours of Wednesday, despite troops being dispatched to arrest political leaders, and unanimously passed a motion demanding that martial law be ended. For hours, Yoon hesitated before lifting martial law and withdrawing the troops from the streets. To flout the motion was a clear constitutional breach that would only add further fuel to the protests that were already gathering.

A huge protest took place on Saturday outside the

National Assembly as preparations were being made for the impeachment vote. Police estimated the number present at 149,000 while protest organisers claimed that a million people took part. Whatever the exact number, photos and video showed that hundreds of thousands participated.

The people were clearly shocked and outraged at Yoon's attempt to return the country to military dictatorship. The last declaration of martial law in 1979 followed the assassination of Park Chung-hee, who himself seized power in a military coup in 1961. General Chun Doo-hwan consolidated his grip on power in 1980 and violently suppressed any opposition, including through the notorious massacre of protesting students in the city of Gwangju that left up to 2,000 dead.

Hong Sun-young, a 70-year-old restaurant owner in Seoul, who took part in a protest last Wednesday with her husband, told media: "I lived through the time of May 18 and over my dead body will this country regress to see another dictatorship." May 18 marked the start of the protests in Gwangju.

Another elderly protester Kim Il-whan, a 72-year-old retiree, told the *Financial Times*: "I was so stunned by his martial law decree that I couldn't sleep at all last night... I was so scared because his declaration of martial law reminded me of the Gwangju massacre."

Many young people have also joined the protests stunned that the democratic rights that they have grown up with could be so easily stripped away. It was only in the late 1980s amid widespread protests and strikes that the dictatorship was ended and elections held.

Speaking to *JoongAng Ilbo*, Park, a 25-year-old woman, said: "I used to not be interested in politics very much. But I knew something was off when martial law was declared. My friends agree with me. My parents, not so much, but so many here are shouting the same things I'm thinking."

Gu, an 18-year-old high school girl, commented: "My mother told me not to come here today, saying that the adults will sort it out. But I didn't see the adults sorting it out, so I decided to take it upon myself."

Lee, 32 years old, told the *Korea Times*: "When I first heard the news [about the martial law], I thought it was fake news. When I heard the helicopter moving around, my kids started crying. That's why I joined the rally with my family."

Behind the political turmoil lies a deepening social and economic crisis in South Korea that has led to an upsurge of industrial unrest. Economic growth has fallen from 6.8 percent in 2010 to 1.4 percent last year. The IMF expects a marginal increase to 2.2 percent in 2024. According to the ILO, 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.

In the wake of Yoon's declaration of martial law, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), which is closely aligned with the Democrats, declared it would hold an "indefinite general strike" until the president resigned. In reality, the "general strike" is no more than a series of limited stoppages, some of which had already been planned.

The major planned strike was by the Korean Railway Workers' Union (KRWU), which began a partial stoppage against the Korea Railroad Corporation (Korail) on Thursday that continued through the weekend. School support staff workers at 200 schools in Seoul and 1,330 schools in Gyeonggi Province also struck on Friday as planned over their uncertain status as non-regular workers and poor pay.

Stoppages not previously planned included four-hour partial strikes on Thursday and Friday by 43,000 workers at Hyundai Motors. Partial walkouts also took place at GM Korea and auto parts companies like Hyundai Mobis and Hyundai Steel.

The KCTU claims it will expand the strikes on December 11 if Yoon does not resign. However, both the Democrats and their trade union allies are desperate to prevent a mass movement against Yoon developing that threatens to get out of their control.

While the Democrats seek to limit the scope of the protests to parliamentary and legal action, the KCTU is determined to restrict industrial action and its impact on corporate profits. In doing so, the Democrats and the unions only strengthen the hand of Yoon and the right-wing PPP and heighten the danger that he will hold onto office.



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