

South Korean president faces second impeachment vote

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South Korea's main opposition Democratic Party (DP) has resubmitted a second motion in the National Assembly to impeach President Yoon Suk-yeol over his failed attempt to impose martial law last week and in essence carry out a military coup.

DP spokeswoman Gang Yu-jeong announced the DP's schedule for the motion on Wednesday, saying, "We have decided to reintroduce the impeachment motion today; it will be reported to the National Assembly on the 12th; and the vote will take place at 5 p.m. Saturday." Like last weekend, the vote will no doubt coincide with large-scale protests demanding Yoon's removal from office.

The Democrats pledged to repeatedly reintroduce the impeachment motion to parliament after the first was defeated on December 7, when all but three of the ruling People Power Party's (PPP) 108 members boycotted the proceedings. This prevented a necessary quorum needed to proceed with a vote on Yoon's impeachment.

The unicameral National Assembly is comprised of 300 seats and a two-thirds majority is needed to pass an impeachment motion. The opposition bloc holds 192 seats, with the DP alone holding 170 seats. The remaining seats are controlled by five minor parties, one nominally independent lawmaker, and the National Assembly speaker U Won-sik, who hails from the DP but is formally independent. As the president is from the PPP, the party is granted ruling party status despite having fewer seats.

If the impeachment motion is approved, the president would be suspended from office and his case decided by the Constitutional Court. A presidential election has to be held within 60 days should the court remove Yoon from office.

The PPP has attempted to implement a so-called "roadmap" for Yoon's resignation in February or March, hoping this would allow the party to get on top of the situation. Yoon, however, appears committed to remaining in power and is reportedly preparing a legal

team to challenge his impeachment.

A PPP member told the *Chosun Ilbo*, "There's a growing sentiment within the PPP that if President Yoon does not change his stance before the second impeachment vote, the impeachment motion could become a reality." At least five PPP members have expressed support for Yoon's impeachment.

The new motion will be impacted by charges that Yoon directly ordered the military to seize control of the National Assembly and detain lawmakers. Lieutenant General Gwak Jong-geun, the head of the Army Special Warfare Command, told a parliamentary meeting on Tuesday that following the declaration of martial law Yoon called him to demand the arrest of lawmakers.

Gwak stated, "[Yoon] said the quorum did not appear to be met yet, so I should break down the doors, and go in and drag out the people inside." The general was referring to the quorum and simple majority of 150 necessary for the Assembly to lift martial law, per South Korea's constitution. A total of 190 lawmakers unanimously voted to lift Yoon's declaration early on December 4.

Gwak, who has been suspended from duty, had been given instructions to seize at least six locations, including the National Assembly, the Democratic Party headquarters, and the National Election Commission. While claiming he decided to reject Yoon's order, he also stated he was aware of Yoon's plans for martial law at least two days in advance, which shines a light on the questions of how many in the military were aware of the plans. Many may continue to support a declaration of martial law.

On Wednesday, Yoon's now former defence minister Kim Yong-hyun became the first administration official to be formally arrested for involvement in the attempted coup. Kim was detained on Sunday and waived his right to a review of his arrest warrant. He reportedly attempted to commit suicide on Wednesday. The heads of the

National Police Agency and Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency Jo Ji-ho and Kim Bong-sik respectively were also placed under emergency detention.

Yoon has already been booked as a suspect in the investigation under charges of insurrection and rebellion. He has been barred from leaving the country and faces the possibility of detention. South Korean presidents are immune from prosecution while in office except in cases of insurrection.

Investigators on Wednesday were sent to raid Yoon's offices, the Presidential Security Service and the Joint Chiefs of Staff building. They sought documents related to Yoon's cabinet meeting that took place shortly before the declaration of martial law. Yoon's security, however, blocked the investigators from entering and only agreed to hand over limited material.

While Yoon is under siege and a number of his top officials are under investigation, the president remains in control of the military, despite a deal cobbled together last weekend by the PPP and Prime Minister Han Duck-soo in which they claimed Yoon would step back from all his state duties.

Jeon Ha-gyu, a Defence Ministry spokesman, confirmed on Monday: "Legally, (the control of military forces) currently lies with the commander in chief," that is, Yoon. This makes it entirely possible that the president could declare martial law again.

Amid these investigations and parliamentary measures, the concern within the ruling class is not the defence of democracy, but that the political system is increasingly discredited in the eyes of the public. An opinion poll by Hangil Research released Wednesday showed that 72.6 percent of the public strongly support impeachment. Yoon was already widely despised before his failed coup as workers' wages and conditions have declined and a growing strike wave began to emerge.

Both the ruling and opposition parties hope to head off growing public opposition to not only Yoon, but the political system that created him. The declaration of martial law on December 3 was not simply the result of Yoon's personality. It was an indication that sections of the ruling class feel they can no longer rule within the framework of bourgeois democracy.

The Democrats, with the aid of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), hope they can quickly remove Yoon through impeachment and install their own candidate as president before social discontent has an opportunity to grow.

Despite claims of launching an "indefinite general

strike" last week to force Yoon to resign and its supposed expansion on Wednesday, the KCTU and its affiliated unions have held a handful of limited walkouts—several of which had already been planned in previous weeks—that are now being shut down in coordination with the Democratic Party.

A railway strike that began on December 5 has been called off after Choi Myeong-ho, the head of the Korean Railway Workers' Union, met with DP leader Lee Jae-myung, who acted as "mediator" between the union bureaucrats and the Korea Railroad Corporation (Korail). The union quickly reached a sellout deal with Korail Wednesday afternoon, pledging to send all striking workers back to work by 7 p.m. that day.

At the same time, the Korean Metal Workers' Union (KMWU), which represents autoworkers, claims it would launch new strikes on Wednesday, after a handful of partial walkouts last week. The KMWU declared on Tuesday, "We will not stop the industrial union-level struggle to purge the Yoon Suk-yeol regime and achieve democracy."

This "struggle" amounts to holding two-hour partial strikes during the day and night shifts at Kia, GM Korea, and auto parts supplier Hyundai Mobis while the more than 43,000 union members at Hyundai Motors are being kept on the job. That these strikes are going ahead, even in the truncated form, is an indication of widespread anger among workers for which the unions are providing a safety valve.

Ultimately, by working to contain the protests to what takes place within the National Assembly, the Democrats and the unions are only encouraging Yoon to stall and cling to power, thereby creating the conditions for another coup attempt.



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