

South Korean president stonewalls removal from office

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22 December 2024

A week after South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol was impeached by the National Assembly, the country's political crisis continues to deepen. Yoon, with the assistance of the ruling People Power Party (PPP), is seeking to block investigations into his extraordinary declaration of martial law on the evening of December 3–4 and to prevent his removal from office.

After being impeached on December 14, Yoon was suspended from office pending a decision in the Constitutional Court on whether or not to remove him. Prime Minister Han Duck-soo, who was appointed by Yoon and is now acting president, used his presidential powers on Thursday to veto six bills passed by the National Assembly, where the opposition Democratic Party (DP) holds a majority.

This is only the second time since the end of the US-backed military dictatorship in the 1980s that an acting president has exercised the veto power. The bills included four providing financial assistance to the agricultural and fishery sectors, and another giving greater power to the National Assembly to summon and require information from officials. The bills have now returned to parliament, where a two-thirds majority is needed to overturn Han's vetoes. The DP and its allies hold only 192 out of 300 seats.

Significantly, Han also has refused to date to approve National Assembly nominees to the nine-member Constitutional Court to fill three vacant positions. If the nominees are blocked, it sets a very high bar for Yoon's removal from office. Constitutionally, all six existing judges must vote in favour of the impeachment.

The political confrontation between acting president Han and the DP-controlled National Assembly will come to a head tomorrow. The Democrats yesterday

issued an ultimatum to Han, demanding that he approve bills establishing special counsel investigations into insurrection charges against Yoon and corruption allegations against Yoon's wife, or face impeachment himself. In addition, they have suggested that Han may have been involved in the martial law decree.

Yoon is also stonewalling. In the immediate wake of his failed attempt to impose martial law and the wave of outrage that swept the country, the president publicly apologised and promised to cooperate with legal and constitutional proceedings. Since then, however, he has refused to answer summonses or hand over documents.

Yoon also failed to appear last Wednesday at the Corruption Investigation Office (CIO) for questioning over charges of insurrection and abuse of power. A CIO statement declared that his no-show would be "considered as a failure to comply with the first summons." A second summons has been issued and the CIO is reportedly considering the possibility of Yoon's arrest.

The fact that Yoon feels he can brazenly impede his removal from office is a result firstly of the perfidy of the Democrats and their allies in the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU). They have wound back the mass protests and strikes that erupted over the declaration of martial law and channelled the widespread anger into the narrow confines of parliamentary manoeuvres.

Yoon's attempt to wind back the clock to the military dictatorships of the past failed in large measure because of the immediate protests it provoked and ruling class fears of a mass outpouring of anger. Thousands of people gathered around the National Assembly in the early hours of December 4 and prevented the arrest of key political figures, including the opposition leader and parliamentary speaker.

The National Assembly was able to convene and pass a motion demanding Yoon lift the martial law decree. While constitutionally required to accede to the motion, Yoon prevaricated for several hours, no doubt consulting both domestically and internationally as to whether he should simply ignore the demand. Finally, he relented.

The KCTU immediately swung into action, declaring that it would initiate a “general strike” until Yoon was removed from office. In reality, the “general strike” proved to be nothing more than limited stoppages in several sectors, such as auto and rail, some of which had already been planned.

Following Yoon’s impeachment, the KCTU announced on December 16 that it was lifting its “general strike guidelines.” KCTU head Yang Gyeong-su claimed that Yoon’s suspension from office amounted to a victory. “In the end, democracy, workers and citizens, and the KCTU won,” he said.

Mass protests against Yoon continued last Saturday. Organisers estimated that 300,000 took part in the largest demonstration, in the capital Seoul, to demand his resignation and arrest. Farmers associated with the Korean Peasants League attempted to join the protests, driving into Seoul with tractors and cargo trucks, but were blocked by police. Other protests involving thousands were held around South Korea, including in Busan, Gwangju, Jeonju, Ulsan, Daegu and Jeju.

While large, the protests were significantly smaller than those the previous Saturday, when organisers estimated that two million gathered near the National Assembly building where lawmakers were preparing to vote on a second motion to impeach Yoon. Older participants who had experienced the brutality of military dictatorship expressed their determination to never allow a return. Young people were clearly shocked that basic democratic rights could be so easily overturned.

The fact that Yoon has not resigned and the right-wing PPP has even begun to organise pro-Yoon rallies suggests that he has powerful support in international circles. The Biden administration, in particular, welcomed Yoon’s decision to forge close military and intelligence ties with Japan in what amounts to a tripartite alliance with the US as Washington prepares for war against China. Such a pact had been previously thwarted by deep-seated animosity toward Japan

stemming from its harsh colonial rule over Korea from 1910 to 1945.

While the Biden administration indicated that Yoon should withdraw the martial law decree, it has not condemned his wholesale assault on democratic rights, nor called for his removal from office. If Yoon had succeeded, South Korea would now be under martial law, all political and strike activity would be banned, and blanket censorship imposed. Yet Washington, which hypocritically exploits the banner of “democracy” to wage regime-change operations, is silent when it comes the gross abuses of political allies if its geopolitical interests are at stake.

The turn to autocratic methods of rule in South Korea is part of the turn internationally to extreme right-wing and fascistic regimes—revealed most starkly by the installation of the fascist Trump as US president. Amid a worsening crisis of global capitalism that is fuelling acute social tension in South Korea and internationally, the ruling classes cannot impose their agenda of war and austerity by democratic means.



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