

South Korea's acting president impeached amid ongoing protests

Ben McGrath
29 December 2024

The acute political crisis in South Korea continues to deepen as the National Assembly, led by the main opposition Democratic Party (DP), voted to impeach acting president Han Duck-soo on Friday. Han, who is also prime minister, assumed presidential duties on December 14, when President Yoon Suk-yeol was also impeached and suspended from office over his failed attempt to impose martial law on December 3.

The DP submitted the motion against Han to the 300-seat parliament on Thursday. It passed the following day 192-0, with the DP's 170 seats and the rest from minor parties or nominal "independents" aligned with the Democrats. All 108 members of the ruling People Power Party (PPP) boycotted the vote. Although a parliamentary minority, it holds ruling party status as President Yoon comes from the PPP.

The PPP is seeking an injunction to reverse parliament's decision last Friday. While the South Korean constitution requires a two-thirds parliamentary majority to impeach a president, a cabinet minister can be impeached by a simple majority. The party argues that since Han is serving as the acting president, the two-thirds majority rule should apply to him.

Han publicly accepted his impeachment, stating, "I respect the decision of the National Assembly, and in order not to add to the confusion and uncertainty, I will suspend my duties in line with relevant laws, and wait for the swift and wise decision of the Constitutional Court." The court rules on whether impeached officials are removed from power or not. He has been replaced as acting president by Finance Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Choi Sang-mok.

Han, appointed by Yoon to his cabinet, and the PPP have stonewalled impeachment proceedings against Yoon. In impeaching Han, the DP cited his refusal to appoint three new Constitutional Court justices to fill

existing vacancies, as well as blocking bills to establish special counsel probes into Yoon's attempt to impose martial law and into his wife, Kim Geon-hui, who is accused of corruption.

The DP also accused Han, in his capacity as prime minister, of failing to oppose Yoon's attempt to impose martial law, essentially a coup plot, which Han admitted to learning about nearly two hours before the president made his declaration.

In order to remove a president from office, six of nine judges on the Constitutional Court must approve. They have 180 days from Yoon's suspension to make a decision. Currently, there are only six judges on the court, with three vacant seats since October. This means if only one justice sides with Yoon, he would return to office with all presidential powers, including over the military.

The Constitutional Court is one of the country's two top-level judicial bodies, alongside the Supreme Court. The president appoints all nine justices; however, only three are directly chosen by the chief executive. Three justices are nominated by the chief justice of the Supreme Court and the other three are nominated by the National Assembly.

At present, two justices were directly appointed by Yoon's predecessor, Moon Jae-in, a Democrat. One was directly appointed by Yoon. The other three were chosen by the Supreme Court. The National Assembly is now wrangling over the appointment of its three allotted judges, with the PPP claiming that an acting president cannot legally appoint the justices. Han had sided with the PPP.

Mass protests are continuing against Yoon and the PPP, which demonstrators see as an accomplice in the president's attempt to impose a military dictatorship. On Saturday, upwards of 500,000 protesters gathered in

Gwanghwamun, Seoul calling for Yoon's removal from office and arrest. They also called for the dissolution of the PPP. Police claimed only 35,000 took part, a drastic undercounting meant to downplay the protests in hopes of preventing them from growing.

Notably, many anti-government protesters on Saturday also waved Palestinian flags in opposition to Israel's more than year-long genocide in Gaza and expansion of war throughout the Middle East, which has been backed by Seoul. It is a recognition that the attack on democratic rights is not limited to a single government, but is being carried out by the ruling class around the world. It is also a sign of the anti-war sentiment that exists within the South Korean population.

A counterprotest of Yoon's supporters took place approximately a kilometer away, which police also estimated at 35,000 participants. Organisers ludicrously claimed three million people took part, a fact easily disproven by photos of the rally. Yoon is also widely despised with over 75 percent of the population supporting his removal from office.

While large by any measure, Saturday's anti-Yoon rally was significantly smaller than the two million who demonstrated at the National Assembly on December 14 to demand Yoon's impeachment. The Democrats are downplaying the continuing danger to democratic rights, seeking to direct public anger behind the actions of the National Assembly as well as the impeachment of figures like Han Duck-soo.

The DP and their supporters in smaller fake "progressive" parties and the trade unions conduct the rallies, like the one on Saturday, as campaign events and present Yoon's removal from office as practically a done-deal. All the problems workers, farmers and youth face are laid at the feet of Yoon, giving the impression that if only he were gone, social and economic problems would be resolved.

As well, the DP's allies in the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) have ended their token "indefinite general strike," which was nothing more than scattered protests and short, partial walkouts designed to let workers blow off steam without affecting big business or the government.

Yoon's coup attempt was not ultimately the result of one man's predilection for authoritarianism. It was a product of the crisis of capitalism, which is unfolding

around the world. The ruling classes are increasingly turning to far-right and fascist figures, notably Donald Trump in the United States, to impose their will on the working class.

The DP and its allies are seeking to limit the protests to the safe channels of the National Assembly and court system in order to protect the capitalist system itself, thereby covering up the potential for another declaration of martial law should Yoon resume office. This is in a country that was dominated by dictatorial and military rule from its founding as a state in 1948 through the 1980s. Behind the façade of democratic reforms erected after mass protests in 1987, the military and state apparatus retain tremendous influence.

The Democrats' perfidy has only emboldened Yoon. He and his legal team have largely rejected cooperation with the impeachment and investigation into his martial law declaration. For nearly two weeks, Yoon refused to accept documents from the Constitutional Court related to hearings in his impeachment trial.

On Friday, Yoon's legal team did finally accept court documents at the last minute before the first impeachment hearing. Yun Gap-geun, one of Yoon's lawyers, claimed that the documents were delivered "illegally" and that they were unable to prepare properly. The next hearing is scheduled for January 3.

Yoon has also ignored summons from the Corruption Investigation Office for High-ranking Officials (CIO) to appear for questioning, including a third summons requesting he appear this past Sunday on charges of insurrection and abuse of power. It is possible the CIO will request an arrest warrant for Yoon, but this will by no means resolve the ongoing political crisis.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact