

Impeached South Korean president blocks arrest

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In a sign of the intensifying political crisis in South Korea, investigators and police attempted to execute an arrest warrant for impeached President Yoon Suk-yeol on Friday. He is the first sitting South Korean president to be the subject of an arrest warrant. They were rebuffed however by the president's security detail including a military detachment.

The Seoul Western District Court issued the arrest warrant for Yoon on Tuesday at the request of the Corruption Investigation Office for High-ranking Officials (CIO), which is investigating Yoon's failed attempt to impose martial law on December 3. The court also issued a separate warrant for investigators to search Yoon's presidential residence in Yongsan, Seoul, which they were also unable to carry out.

The CIO requested the warrant after Yoon refused to appear for questioning three times, most recently on December 29. Yoon has been accused of insurrection and abuse of power and is already listed as a criminal suspect in the case. While sitting presidents are immune from prosecution, this does not apply to charges of insurrection and treason. Yoon has denounced the CIO, claiming it has no authority to investigate his martial law declaration. His lawyers called the arrest warrant "illegal."

When CIO officials and the police arrived at Yoon's residence Friday morning, they attempted to enter at around 8:00 a.m., but were blocked by the Presidential Security Service (PSS) and the 55th Security Brigade, which belongs to the Army's Capital Defense Command, but is subordinate to the PSS. Clashes between the two sides reportedly broke out and a standoff lasted for approximately five and half hours before the CIO called off the attempt to arrest Yoon.

The PSS is responsible for the president's security. However, it is not simply a division of bodyguards, but an independent section of the South Korean state bureaucracy. It has its own political interests while being

close to the president, with influence over policy, the police and the military. The now former Defense Minister Kim Yong-hyun, who has been arrested for playing a leading role in the declaration of martial law, led the PSS from May 2022 when Yoon took office until September 2024. He is a close friend and confidant of Yoon.

The CIO released a statement afterwards saying, "We determined that executing the detention warrant would be practically impossible due to the continued confrontation, and suspended the execution out of concern for the safety of on-site personnel caused by the resistance. We plan to decide on the next steps following a review." The warrant remains valid until Monday.

Approximately a thousand of Yoon's supporters also demonstrated outside the residence in an attempt to block the president's arrest. They are a collection of far-right and fascistic forces, lacking any popular support. They appealed openly to US imperialism, waving American flags alongside South Korean ones, which is common at their rallies. Some even held signs that read in English, "Stop the steal," the same slogan used by Trump and his supporters to call for the January 6, 2021 coup attempt in Washington.

Yoon attempted to whip up this mob, telling them on January 1, "Due to internal and external forces infringing on its sovereignty and the activities by anti-state forces, South Korea is now in danger. I will fight with you to the end to protect this country." This is the same rationale Yoon used to first declare martial law, claiming that the Democrats and their allies were "anti-state" elements who had to be suppressed by force.

Pro-Yoon demonstrations pale in comparison to the hundreds of thousands that have protested each weekend in Seoul demanding Yoon's removal from office and arrest. On December 14, the day Yoon was impeached and suspended from office by the National Assembly, two million gathered outside parliament in opposition to the

president.

Yoon's impeachment or even potential arrest does not guarantee he will be removed from power. Presently, the Constitutional Court, which has 180 days from December 14 to decide on the president's fate, may very well allow him to return to office. With the support of the PPP and right-wing bureaucrats, Yoon has also stonewalled his impeachment proceedings and the criminal investigation into his martial law declaration, which was in effect a coup attempt.

The Constitutional Court is comprised of nine justices who are approved by the president. Three are chosen by the executive, with three recommended by the chief justice of the Supreme Court and three recommended by the National Assembly. Since October, three vacancies had existed on the court to be filled by parliament.

After Yoon's impeachment, the main opposition Democratic Party (DP) moved quickly to fill the three vacancies. Prime Minister Han Duck-soo, who first replaced Yoon as acting president, refused to approve them, with the PPP claiming an acting president lacked the authority. The votes of six justices are necessary to remove a president from office, meaning only one had to side with Yoon to keep him in power.

As a result, the DP impeached Han on December 27 and he was replaced with Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Choi Sang-mok. In an apparent compromise, Choi appointed one justice recommended by the DP and another by the PPP on Tuesday. The Democrats have demanded Choi appoint the final justice recommend by their party.

However, as a capitalist party, the Democrats do not defend the democratic rights of workers and youth any more than Yoon or the PPP. Instead, the Democrats' conflict with Yoon is over how best to impose the demands of big business.

Sections of the ruling establishment grouped around Yoon and the PPP increasingly see open dictatorship as necessary to suppress growing working-class anger to declining economic conditions and attacks on jobs. A significant strike by Samsung Electronics workers last July, a month-long auto part workers' strike in October-November that shut down production at Hyundai, and strikes by railway workers in early December no doubt weighed on Yoon's attempt to impose military rule.

On the other hand, the DP seeks to suppress the class struggle through phony promises of reforms and through their allies in the trade unions, such as the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU). Yoon's often

belligerent attacks on political opponents since taking office combined with worsening conditions for workers cut across the Democrats' efforts, risking the explosion of social anger.

The DP is now rolling back protests in an attempt to head off the growth of social opposition, block opposition from growing, and prevent people from making the connections between Yoon's attack on democratic rights and the broader crisis of capitalism internationally. They want to convince workers and youth that democratic rights can be defended within the National Assembly and the judicial system; and have turned anti-Yoon protests into campaign events and musical performances, all designed to cover up the political issues involved.

The Democrats have also worked with the KCTU to call off job actions like the December railway strike while presenting Yoon's removal from office as practically a done deal. The KCTU initially claimed it would wage an "indefinite general strike" against Yoon. In the end, this amounted to little more than scattered protests and partial walkouts to allow workers to vent their anger while having no impact on big business or the government.

The danger of another declaration of martial law or military coup remains. If Yoon returns to power, he will do so with all the powers he previously held, including over the military. If mass protests grow against Yoon, it is also not out of the question that the military itself steps in to impose martial law, something it has considered in the past.

The Democrats' and KCTU's downplaying of the existing dangers only embolden Yoon and his supporters. The defense of democratic rights can only be carried out through the independent mobilisation of the working class against the entire political establishment and the capitalist system it defends.



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