

South Korean court confirms president Yoon's impeachment

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South Korea's Constitutional Court upheld the impeachment of former President Yoon Suk-yeol on Friday in a unanimous 8-0 decision. The ruling took effect immediately, removing Yoon from office and triggering a special presidential election likely to take place on June 3.

Acting chief justice Mun Hyeong-bae read the verdict at 11 am, declaring, "The negative effects on the constitutional order and the repercussions from the defendant's violations of the law are grave, making the benefits of protecting the constitution by dismissing the defendant larger than the national losses from dismissing the president by an overwhelming degree."

Yoon was impeached on December 14, less than two weeks after he attempted to impose martial law on December 3 in an attempted military-backed coup. The court rejected Yoon's claims that a national emergency existed that required such a measure. The court also declared that Yoon violated the law by sending troops into the National Assembly, in an attempt to arrest leading lawmakers and block the vote that took place to lift Yoon's martial law declaration.

Yoon, who did not attend Friday's court session, and his legal team had falsely claimed that the main opposition Democratic Party's (DP) control of the National Assembly had "paralyzed the constitutional order" and that the DP was working in league with "pro-North Korean leftist forces."

After the ruling, Yoon issued a statement, saying that he "apologizes and deeply regrets not living up to expectations." His party, the ruling People Power Party (PPP), also stated that it "humbly accepts" the court's decision. As Yoon was president, the PPP enjoys ruling-party status, despite having fewer numbers in parliament. The Democrats claimed the impeachment verdict was a "people's victory."

Yoon departs office as a massively unpopular figure, with opinion polls showing that two-thirds of the population supports his removal from office. In addition to the impeachment trial, he also faces criminal charges for insurrection after he was arrested and detained in January. He was released on a technicality on March 8.

The government mobilized a huge number of police, including riot units and SWAT teams, in preparation for the court's verdict. A total of 20,000 officers were on hand nationwide with 14,000 placed in Seoul near key government offices, including around the Constitutional Court building, near Yoon's presidential residence in Yongsan, and in Gwanghwamun, where protests typically take place.

Anti-Yoon protesters gathered outside the Constitutional Court Thursday and Friday, where organizers estimated 150,000 people took part. Pro-Yoon demonstrators, who have included far-right and fascistic elements, were much fewer in number, reaching at most about 30,000.

In the face of this massive mobilization of police, it is important to note that mass protests broke out in 2016 and 2017 to denounce the corruption of then-president Park Geun-hye, who was subsequently impeached and removed from office. At the conclusion of her trial, the military developed plans to impose martial law if the mass protests against the government did not subside. Similar plans could be in the works now.

Publicly, the ruling class will now turn its attention to the upcoming presidential election, which will likely be a contest between the Democrats' leader Lee Jae-myung, the established frontrunner, and a candidate selected by the PPP. Lee narrowly lost the 2022 presidential election to Yoon.

Yoon's removal from office is not a sign that

democracy is alive and well in South Korea or that the political crisis in the country has been resolved. Rather, the Constitutional Court's unanimous verdict, without even a token dissenting voice in support of Yoon, was a calculated political decision following weeks of delay after the final hearing on February 25.

It was aimed at defusing the growth of broad social anger that found expression in anti-Yoon protests. At their height, as many as two million people gathered at the National Assembly on December 14 to demand the president's ouster.

The South Korean ruling class feared that Yoon's return to office would provoke a renewal of mass demonstrations that would grow far beyond the control of the political establishment, in particular that of the Democrats and their allies in the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU).

In part popular anger towards Yoon was fueled by memories of South Korea's past brutal dictatorships. There is also growing anger in the working class, including a developing strike movement, amid persistent declining real wages and stalled economic growth. This year, the Bank of Korea expects the GDP to grow by only 1.5 percent. It grew just 2 percent in 2024 and 1.4 percent in 2023.

The election of Trump as US president further complicated matters for the South Korean bourgeoisie, which is concerned that Trump's trade war measures will worsen conditions for the export-oriented economy and deepen social discontent. Just this week, Washington imposed 25 percent tariffs on all exports from South Korea.

Fearing a social explosion, the Democrats did everything in their power to demobilize the mass protests that broke out in December and to block strikes by workers with the aid of the KCTU. Their primary concern was to prevent the development of any significant social movement that put forward demands that went beyond the removal of Yoon and targeted the capitalist system itself.

Instead, the Democrats worked to present Yoon's removal from office as a done deal following his initial impeachment. They could not have foreseen the outcome of the impeachment trial, setting up a situation in which Yoon could have returned to office and potentially declared martial law again.

In doing so, the Democrats provided Yoon, the PPP,

and their fascistic supporters with breathing room, and facilitated the development of the far-right pro-Yoon protests. While dwarfed by the anti-Yoon movement and lacking any broad support, these fascistic elements were given the space to stage rallies and threaten their political opponents with violence.

The threat of dictatorship has not passed. At present, South Korean ruling class may not yet be ready to dispense with bourgeois democracy, believing it to be preferable to martial law for imposing its agenda of austerity measures and forcing the working class to foot the bill for the crisis of capitalism.

However, as the economic and political crisis worsens, it is to these fascistic elements that the political establishment will turn if it decides imposing martial law or another form of dictatorship is necessary. This is already taking place around the world as the ruling classes in other countries shift further and further to the right, exemplified most clearly by the fascist Trump regime in the US.

The Democrats and their allies in the KCTU and other trade union organizations will continue to downplay this danger in order to protect the capitalist system in an attempt to prevent workers from drawing the conclusion that the capitalist system is the root cause of the escalating attacks on their democratic and social rights.



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