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An Overly Deep Political Crisis in South Korea

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Summary

South Korea, specifically its president, Yoon Suk Yeol, shocked the world when martial law was declared at the beginning of December. For the first time in 40 years, citizens witnessed an attempt by the armed forces to seize parliament and eliminate political competition. The state of emergency ultimately lasted only six hours. However, the consequences for the entire nation are unfathomable. The president has been stripped of his powers, faces charges of treason, and is the subject of an arrest warrant. The country also continues to spiral deeper into a political crisis that has persisted for over a decade. In the current chaotic situation, it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish who is defending democracy and who seeks to seize power.

Main Points

- President Yoon Suk Yeol declared martial law in the country. He accused the opposition Democratic Party of sympathizing with totalitarian North Korea and engaging in anti-state activities.
- Lawmakers, followed by the government, annulled the state of emergency. Martial law was in effect for six hours. However, the political crisis continues to this day.
- Yoon faces serious accusations, and an arrest warrant has been issued. Parliament has stripped him of his powers (just like his successor), and now the Minister of Finance is 'ruling' the country. The Constitutional Court will decide on the further steps.

Few countries have their democracy as hard-won and, at the same time, as fragile as South Korea. This is why the declaration of martial law evokes such strong emotions among both its opponents and supporters. It was the year 1980 when the country last experienced a state of emergency—General Chun Doo-hwan took control of the secret service, dissolved parliament, and sent special military units into major cities. Many opposition politicians ended up in prison. Now, more than 40 years later, history has repeated itself when President Yoon Suk Yeol appeared on television in the middle of the night and declared martial law again due to a threat from anti-state forces.

The Declaration of Martial Law

The entire situation unfolded far too quickly. It lasted only a few—precisely six—hours. It was just before midnight on December 3, 2024, when the country's president, Yoon Suk Yeol, appeared on television and, in a brief speech, informed citizens that anti-state forces were operating in South Korea. He accused the opposition Democratic Party, which controls parliament, of collaborating with the DPRK.

A martial law headquarters was established, and the military announced a ban on parliament and political parties. About 300 armed soldiers attempted to enter the legislative building. They were held back by parliamentary assistants who used fire extinguishers to try to drive them away. Opposition leader Lee Jae-myung called on citizens to come to the defence of democracy. On the streets, police patrol cars and riot police buses faced off against thousands of people. Helicopters landed overhead.

All members of parliament were summoned to the legislature. The law clearly states that if a majority of lawmakers request it, the government must revoke martial law. That is exactly what happened. All 190 of the 300 MPs present voted against the state of emergency. The cabinet subsequently supported this decision. The Democratic Party then called for the president's resignation. If he does not step down voluntarily, they will begin the process to remove him from office.

It was 4:30 a.m. when martial law came to an end.

Impeachment of the President

News from South Korea spread like an avalanche around the world. Videos were everywhere, and politicians watched with bated breath how quickly democracy could collapse. The United States: is concerned, Russia: is concerned, the Czech Republic: is concerned and closely monitoring developments, the European Union: is concerned. Everyone was watching to see what would happen in the following minutes, hours, and eventually days.

The opposition members of the Democratic Party immediately started a counteraction and presented a proposal for the president's removal. The petition was signed by 190 opposition lawmakers and one independent. That was the first chance. On the second attempt to remove Yoon (on December 14), the opposition succeeded. Government lawmakers joined their side, leading to the president being stripped of his constitutional powers until the Constitutional Court decided on his fate.

President Yoon Suk Yeol now faces charges of treason and suspicions of abuse of power. A special advisor, appointed by the parliament, is to investigate everything. Yoon has so far resisted requests to testify and has blocked voluntary access to his office. This led to an arrest warrant being issued against him. However, detaining a president with security is not easy. Dozens of investigators described the unprecedented situation when they tried to detain him and bring him to the police, but around 200 members of the military and security forces stood in their way on the grounds of Yoon's residence. The operation was ended after six hours without any result.

Constitutional Court

Power distribution: The parliament consists of 300 members, with the opposition holding 190 seats. Two-thirds of the votes are needed to remove the president. Subsequently, the step must be confirmed by the Constitutional Court within six months, specifically by six of its members: that is, one less than the minimum number of seven judges required to hear the case of the president's removal. However, at the time, the court did not have enough members. Legislators themselves had to speed up the process of appointing new judges before the impeachment. If parliament's decision is upheld and the head of state is removed from office, new elections must be held within 60 days, and Yoon would become the second president in the country's history to be impeached.

However, the political crisis and instability may deepen even further. According to the law, the president's powers were transferred to Prime Minister Han Duck-soo. Yet, the opposition Democratic Party accused him of obstructing the appointment of three new Constitutional Court judges, a step deemed crucial. Consequently, parliament passed a law to remove him from office. Presidential duties were then transferred to another candidate, Finance Minister Choi Sang-mok. South Korea now has its second acting "president" within a single month. One might be tempted to add that this time, perhaps, it will lead to a successful resolution.

Meanwhile, the Constitutional Court announced the schedule for proceedings. The first preparatory session is planned for mid-January, followed by four more sessions until early February. Yoon, through his lawyer, has stated that he is prepared to testify before the judges regarding the circumstances surrounding the declaration of martial law.

Who Is South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol

South Koreans knew Yoon Suk Yeol as a very successful Attorney General. He put former President Park Geun-hye, who served as South Korea's president from 2013 to 2017, and her predecessor behind bars. Yoon decided to run in the 2022 elections as a candidate for the conservative People Power Party. He gained public sympathy mainly because he had no political experience and was not associated with the previous government, which was plagued by one corruption scandal after another. The election result, however, was the closest in history—he won by less than one percentage point.

The former executioner of corrupt officials promised to transform the country. Not only did he have ambitions to tackle scandals at the highest levels, but he also wanted to solve the housing crisis and pressure Pyongyang. However, many of his plans were not fulfilled. His own party did not and does not have a majority in parliament, and not all party members agreed with Yoon's policies. The president thus achieved almost nothing and responded to opposition proposals by vetoing most of them. He hardly interacted with journalists and sent police officers and prosecutors after the authors of 'fake news.' He was also unsuccessful in foreign policy. Poor relations with China resulted in an economic downturn, and rising tensions with North Korea led to more missile tests and provocations.

Any attempt at gaining sympathy was ultimately destroyed by Yoon's wife, Kim Keon-hee, who earned the nickname 'Marie Antoinette' among the people. Known are her alleged bribes, such as a luxury Dior handbag and other accessories. She is also said to have been involved in manipulating stocks worth more than 60 million dollars, and last but not least, there was the plagiarism scandal in academic papers. The investigation into his wife was eventually stopped by former prosecutor and President Yoon, who accused his opponents of demonizing his wife.

Why All of This?

In conclusion, it is worth asking, why all of this? Honestly, no one really knows. It was more than clear that the declaration of martial law could not work out for Yoon. When he appeared on TV that evening, he must have known that he had only a few hours before his decision would be overturned by the opposition. Unless he was truly determined to use force, which in today's world is unlikely. The president was (it seems) simply desperate. He disappointed the citizens, and his support was nearing its lowest point, with only 15% of the population satisfied with his work.

Among world leaders, he was even in a worse position than Petr Fiala with 17% or Emmanuel Macron with 18% (Morning Consult 2024). The political failure was glaring. Since his election, he had managed to push through only a minimum of key laws, and his proposals on labour, pensions, support for the private sector, or closer cooperation with Japan were blocked by the opposition. The Democratic Party maintained a majority in parliament, which it further increased in the last elections in April of the previous year.

The country found itself in a deep political crisis. What started as a few hours of senseless presentation turned into a weeks-long battle for power and the country's democratic identity. Korea has its third president in one month, the minister of finance now holds the powers, the prime minister and the president lost their positions, and both men are awaiting a decision from the Constitutional Court. However, in order for the court to make a decision, the opposition had to force someone to appoint new members.

The more uncertain the situation inside the country, the more important it is for South Korea to appear responsible to its foreign partners. That is why the acting president and ministers are calling their counterparts around the world, assuring them that everything is fine – and, above all, that the agreed-upon investment projects are continuing and will continue without any restrictions. The whole world – led by the United States – is watching the events with a certain level of concern. South Korea is strategically very important for Western (or Western-minded) countries; it is like a small island of democracy in the middle of the uncertain environment of Southeast Asia. And America, the European Union, and Japan certainly do not want to lose that. This is also connected to the key interest of South Koreans, who need to constantly and clearly signal to their neighbours beyond the demarcation line that democratic principles are not under threat, the country still declares its pro-Western orientation, and Pyongyang has no chance of spreading its influence.

Sources

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