DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 10.04.2025 | Christoph Heuser

The upcoming rage election

Post-impeachment, South Korea is grappling with a rise in conspiratorial narratives and increasing societal division

On 4 April, the South Korean Constitutional Court unanimously confirmed the impeachment of President Yoon Suk Yeol. This is the second time in less than 10 years that a South Korean president has been removed from office. The ruling came 111 days after the successful impeachment motion in the National Assembly. The reason for the impeachment was the declaration of martial law on 3 December 2024. This move plunged the country into a severe political crisis in what was already a tense geopolitical situation. Only the determined resistance of MPs and citizens forced Yoon to lift the martial law. The fact that the military ultimately did not intervene also caused the plan to fail. Now, a new president will be elected on 3 June. Although the impeachment of Yoon is an expression of the resilience of South Korean democracy, the country is nevertheless facing further challenges.

In the months leading up to the declaration of martial law, President Yoon had come under increasing pressure from the opposition. He had only won the 2022 presidential election by a narrow margin of 0.7 per cent over Lee Jae-myung from the Democratic Party. Lee is once again the most likely candidate for the upcoming elections, despite pending court cases. In the 2024 parliamentary elections, the opposition won a landslide victory. The opposition subsequently used its majority to file numerous impeachment motions against members of the government, block or amend government proposals and put both Yoon and his wife under pressure over an alleged corruption case.

Yoon used his veto power more than any president before him and ultimately, in a desperate attempt to find a way out, declared martial law. In doing so, he plunged South Korea into its most severe crisis since the transition to democracy. And this at a time when geopolitical changes are confronting South Korea with massive challenges: US tariffs are hitting the export-orientated economy hard, and relations with North Korea are at an all-time low, not to mention the fact that Donald Trump repeatedly flirted with the idea of direct talks with Kim Jong Un. While the impeachment proceedings demonstrate the resilience of South Korean

democracy, the large-scale demonstrations, both in favour of and against the impeachment, show a divided society. The rise of anti-democratic forces and increasingly aggressive rhetoric are cause for concern.

An aggressive election campaign

Alongside unsubstantiated claims of North Korean infiltration, Yoon accused the opposition of abusing their parliamentary majority. Political debates in South Korea are becoming increasingly irreconcilable, and polarisation in the country has become entrenched. A particularly dramatic sign of the escalation was the knife attack on opposition leader Lee, which left him seriously injured. Violence continues to reflect the social divide: on the night of 19 January, an angry mob stormed the courthouse that had previously issued the arrest warrant for President Yoon. Opposition politicians have also been attacked.

Tensions are being fuelled further by conspiracy theories — including claims of Chinese influence, North Korean infiltration and electoral fraud in the 2024 parliamentary elections. These are narratives that can also be heard in other parts of the world. It is therefore hardly surprising that 'Stop the Steal' posters can be found at demonstrations against the impeachment — a direct reference to the 2024 elections when the conservative People Power Party (PPP) suffered a resounding defeat. MAGA-style red baseball caps have also been spotted. An 'us against them' sentiment is being stoked by the different perspectives on China and North Korea.

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For a long time, South Korea's democracy was seen as a success story in the region. The country has experienced an impressive economic rise: it has grown from one of the poorest and most war-torn states to a leading industrial nation. However, wealth inequality is growing and more and more people find themselves in precarious employment. In particular, younger population groups are strongly affected and sceptical about the future. South Korea has the lowest birth rate in the world, at the same time, old-age poverty is on the rise and is almost three times as high as the OECD average — measured by income below half of the median income.

Political polarisation has increased significantly in recent years. Indices such as V-Dem show a decline in key areas of democratic standards since

the election of Yoon. Political differences are particularly pronounced along gender lines, even within the same age cohort, and especially among young people under 30. While this group has traditionally been considered rather progressive, the differences are now becoming apparent: young men tend to favour the conservative PPP and were present at anti-impeachment rallies. Yoon campaigned on explicitly anti-feminist policies: he spoke of 'women's privileges', stoked fears of male disadvantage and promised to abolish the Ministry of Women's Affairs. He touched a raw nerve: in fact, only men are obliged to perform military service for up to 21 months. But the still-patriarchal structures, the low proportion of female executives and politicians, and the enormous wage gap show how bizarre the fear of discrimination is. At 31 per cent, the gender pay gap is by far the highest in the OECD.

Radical voices are increasingly gaining influence. Common themes among these currents are a hard line against North Korea, the narrative of an alleged communist infiltration by China or North Korea and a strong pro-American orientation. Yoon also resorted to this rhetoric when justifying the declaration of martial law. Once again, he spoke of North Korean infiltration — even within parliament. It is not uncommon for more progressive politicians to be denigrated as 'communists' across the board. Among the most influential voices are right-wing YouTubers, whose business model is to fuel sentiment with conspiracy theories of communist infiltration. Their influence is enormous, given that the use of YouTube as a primary source of information has increased significantly.

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It is now up to the conservative PPP to disavow itself from radical forces. The first attempt to remove Yoon from office failed due to resistance from the party. Although several PPP MPs finally approved the impeachment in a second vote, some members continue to emphasise their solidarity with Yoon and question the legitimacy of the proceedings. In addition, individual MPs have repeatedly attracted attention through aggressive rhetoric. It is clear that the radical voices in society will not simply disappear and that South Korean democracy will continue to be under pressure even after the impeachment. In parliament, legal means are also used to fight and political opponents are flooded with legal complaints. Both political camps accuse each other of using legal proceedings as a weapon. Even worse, some

sections of society are casting doubt on the legitimacy of the Constitutional Court, even though it is recognised by the majority. Both parties have publicly declared their respect for the ruling. But the seeds of doubt have been sown.

The country is now facing what is likely to be an aggressive election campaign. Although Lee Jae-myung, the Democratic Party's (DP) candidate, is clearly leading in the polls, many conservative South Koreans still consider him unelectable. The events since 3 December are both a sign of democratic resilience and an indication of the dangers to democracy and the radical forces that threaten it. The rifts between the DP and the PPP, but also within South Korean society, have deepened further in recent weeks. At the same time, the agreement on a pension reform shows that cross-party compromises are possible if there is the political will to make them. It will be up to the next government to tackle the structural problems — in addition to the massive challenges at the international level. Furthermore, both political camps must find a way to strengthen dialogue and national reconciliation. Only in this way can the paralysing polarisation be overcome — and ultimately the creeping erosion of democratic institutions be prevented. The upcoming election campaign will be the first test.



Christoph Heuser
Seoul

Christoph Heuser heads the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's (FES) office in South Korea. Previously, he headed the FES office in Brazil.