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When democracy stands alone

South Korean democracy has shown resilience but still faces huge challenges, and Yoon's desperate act has merely added to his country's troubles

In the night of 3 December, South Korean democracy faced what was probably its toughest test to date — and proved itself resilient. By declaring martial law, South Korea's president Yoon Suk Yeol plunged the country into a chaotic situation that culminated in the rescinding of martial law but left the president significantly weakened. The episode has also damaged South Korea, Asia's fourth largest economy, and is likely to result in a period of uncertainty. Ultimately, parliamentary democracy won out, thanks in particular to the decisive action taken by parliamentarians and protesters.

Previously, military rule had last been in force in 1980, when South Korea was still under military dictatorship; back then, its imposition came in conjunction with the suppression of the country's pro-democracy movement during the Gwangju Uprising. The numerous victims of that clampdown remain a source of national trauma for South Korea. Forty-four years later, Yoon's justification for his decision to reimpose martial law seems far-fetched in the extreme. He claimed that anti-state actors and pro-North Korean interests were threatening the country and labelled the National Assembly a monster that needed to be purged. In doing so, Yoon resorted to an anti-Communist narrative that has been frequently used in past decades to defame progressive, liberal forces in South Korea.

Opposition politicians responded swiftly to the socially liberal Democratic Party's night-time call to convene parliament in order to vote against martial law. Dramatic images showed opposition leader Lee Jae-myung climbing over the assembly building's fence in order to gain entry. All 190 of the 300 members who attended, including those from Yoon's own conservative People Power Party, voted in favour of lifting martial law, despite the ongoing presence of soldiers in the building. Just six hours after his declaration had triggered a constitutional crisis, Yoon agreed to rescind martial law following the parliamentary vote.

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During the night, yet more of President Yoon's party colleagues spoke out against him, including People Power Party leader Han Dong-hoon. Close allies distanced themselves from him and numerous advisers resigned from their posts. At the same time, citizens took to the streets in freezing temperatures, protesting outside the assembly building and thus sending a strong pro-democracy message. The trade union council KCTU called for a general strike until Yoon resigns. Yoon survived an impeachment vote in parliament on Saturday, but the leader of his own party said the president would eventually have to step down. There could be consequences for other participants too; Defence Minister Kim Yong-hyun, who resigned earlier this week, has already been arrested, and he, the former interior minister and the Martial law commander could all face charges of treason.

It's hard to explain Yoon's drastic move in purely rational terms. Probably it was motivated by domestic political developments, allied to the extreme polarisation of South Korean politics. This polarisation has made it more difficult for the two main political camps to find compromise solutions, presenting a key challenge for South Korean democracy. Following the ruling People Power Party's heavy defeat in the parliamentary elections this April, the socially liberal opposition was able to increase its majority. Ever since his inauguration in 2022, Yoon has essentially been a lame duck president — his party had already been without a majority in the previous parliament, while he himself only won the presidential election by a margin of 0.8 per cent and has since primarily ruled by exercising his presidential veto.

Yoon has been a controversial figure even within his own party. In addition, his popularity ratings are very low and he has been under pressure personally, partly as a result of corruption accusations levelled against his wife. Across the party spectrum, corruption cases in South Korea are not uncommon. Nonetheless, he was recently forced to make a public apology. The opposition has regularly made use of its parliamentary majority, blocking the government's plans, attempting to initiate impeachment proceedings against members of the government and, most recently, pushing through budget cuts. The latter were probably one of the reasons behind Yoon's desperate decision to declare martial law.

The Yoon administration had previously been noted for its confrontational approach to trade unions and progressive civil society actors and for its gender-critical policy. Its tough attitude towards North Korea, meanwhile, has hindered any form of détente. In addition, press freedoms have been significantly eroded: South Korea has fallen to 62nd in the Reporters Without Borders index. Yoon has frequently attacked critics with vague claims that they were pro-North Korea or anti-state, and has used these accusations to delegitimise legitimate opposition and criticism from civil society.

Foreign policy implications

In recent years, Yoon has invested a great deal in bolstering South Korea's international reputation, seeking to present the country as a stable partner. His foreign policy agenda of making South Korea a pivotal Indo-Pacific state embedded in the Western alliance, which has also seen the country conclude a historic pact with Japan, has been well received. Now, though, that international reputation has been tarnished. His declaration of martial law took international partners by surprise and caused diplomatic damage. Foreign governments, including Germany's, expressed concern about the developments. Sweden cancelled its prime minister's planned visit, while the US postponed meetings of the Nuclear Consultative Group, a working group that aims to increase South Korea's involvement in the US's nuclear planning strategy for the Korean peninsula.

The declaration of martial law has had an economic impact too. South Korea's currency, the won, fell against the US dollar. The country's powerful conglomerates (*chaebols*) are worried about potential instability, and multinational companies have expressed concern. The central bank felt compelled to take measures to calm the markets and restore confidence.

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At this critical juncture in global politics, with Donald Trump beginning his second term, South Korea's immediate focus is likely to be very much on its own domestic politics. Trump has previously called for South Korea to pay significantly more for the 28 000 US soldiers deployed there and for the protection of its nuclear deterrent. In addition, he is likely to take a tougher stance on China, which, given its trade relations with South Korea, would hardly be in the latter's interests. The country has long

sought to maintain a balance in its dealings with the US and China; under Yoon, its ties with the US have been significantly strengthened, but it has also recently been making positive noises towards China. At a time when South Korea urgently needs stability and planning certainty, it instead faces political instability.

Despite citing pro-North Korean forces as a reason for declaring martial law, President Yoon also stressed that his decision would not have any impact on the country's foreign policy. Nevertheless, South Korea's domestic political turmoil plays into Kim Jong Un's hands. So far, North Korea has held back in its response to the crisis, but South Korea's international standing hinges on the very fact of being a stable, flourishing democracy and a reliable partner on the global stage. While South Korean democracy has proved itself resilient, the country's image has been tarnished, and Kim will surely exploit that.

Inter-Korean relations have reached a nadir, and the risk of an unintended military confrontation is as high as it has been for some time. A period of political uncertainty would also represent a security risk. Any remaining hope of a rapprochement between North and South Korea has now been dashed, as underlined by some of the key developments in recent years.

Thanks to its enhanced military partnership with Russia and support for the latter's war of aggression, Pyongyang is now in a significantly stronger strategic position than it was two years ago. Following the unsuccessful summit meetings between Kim and Trump in Hanoi and Singapore in 2018/2019, North Korea had already been shifting its strategic focus towards bolstering its military capabilities and, in particular, its nuclear arsenal. The country has long been a de facto nuclear power. Between early 2022 and mid 2023 alone, it conducted more than 100 ballistic missile tests.

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North-South relations reached a particular low in early 2024, when Kim declared South Korea its number one enemy and distanced himself from the objective of reunification, dissolving all inter-Korean institutions and ordering connecting routes and bridges to be destroyed. Under the previous South Korean government headed by Moon Jae-in, there had been serious moves towards détente, though these were ultimately unsuccessful. In early 2020, South

Korea withdrew its representative from the Joint Liaison Office, which had only been established in 2018; in June 2020, it was then blown up by North Korea. The tougher stance championed by Yoon's new government further undermined any hopes of a thaw in relations, with his administration calling time on the previous government's policy of détente and significantly beefing up its own arsenal. There have still been offers of talks, but these have been conditional on the North take steps towards denuclearisation.

South Korean democracy has passed what was probably its toughest test since democratisation in the late 1980s. Now, though, it's vital to ensure that the subsequent process is conducted in an orderly fashion. Parliamentary and public pressure is likely to increase. On Saturday, Yoon faced an impeachment vote. The president narrowly avoided being ousted from office, with many members of his own party boycotting the vote. South Korean authorities have now imposed a travel ban on Yoon, who is under investigation for his martial law declaration, and his party say they will seek his resignation.

It is in the European Union's direct interest that South Korea remains stable and democratic. The country is a key strategic partner, enjoying close economic and commercial ties with the bloc. In addition, there's the security policy dimension. Having joined the UN Command overseeing the Korean armistice agreement, Germany has a particular interest in détente on the Korean peninsula and in regional security. North Korea's participation in Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine is a stark illustration of how interconnected and interdependent the world's conflict hotspots are. South Korean democracy may have demonstrated its resilience but it still faces huge challenges, and Yoon's ignoble and desperate act has merely added to his country's troubles.

This article is a translation of an article from 4 December, which has been slightly adapted to include the latest developments.



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