FOREIGN
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Can South Korea’s Democracy Survive?

The Country Needs Bottom-Up Reform, Not Just Crisis Management

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Supporters of impeached South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol rallying in Seoul, January 2025
Kim Hong-Ji / Reuters

On December 3, South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol tried to demolish his country’s democracy. In a shocking late-night television address, Yoon declared “emergency martial law” and put the country under military rule. He prohibited all political activities and suspended freedom of speech and the press. He instructed his army chief to shut down the National Assembly, which is controlled by the opposition Democratic Party, and sent the police and special forces to prevent lawmakers from entering the building. By way of justification—and borrowing a page from the political theorist Carl Schmitt’s concept of a “state of exception”—Yoon declared that he was subverting liberal democracy in order to save it.

South Koreans did not take kindly to Yoon’s power grab. Throngs of people rushed to the outside of the assembly building to protest. Lawmakers raced there as well, scaling fences to

enter as protesters blocked soldiers who tried to give pursuit. In a late-night session, the assembly voted to revoke the president's order, as it is legally empowered to do (which is why Yoon attempted to shut it down in the first place). After two more weeks of national outrage and mass protests, and with polls showing that 75 percent of Koreans wanted him gone, the assembly voted to impeach Yoon, 204 to 85. He was then suspended from his duties. Whether he returns or is permanently removed from office depends on the country's Constitutional Court, which has up to six months to rule on the matter. Yoon is facing other legal challenges, as well. He has been arrested by prosecutors. And on Sunday, he became the first sitting president in Korean history to be indicted, on the charge of insurrection.

The events of the last two months demonstrate the resilience of South Korea's democracy, which was established in the late 1980s after decades of military dictatorship. But they also underscore why the country's people are perennially anxious about their freedom. Democracy is a process, not a state, and the night of December 3 illustrates that South Korea's is both more and less vulnerable than was commonly thought.

South Koreans have a long road ahead as they try to dig out from Yoon's failed autocoup. The president's conservative People's Power Party (PPP) remains generally supportive of him and is catering to extremist elements within the country. The liberal Democratic Party is struggling to seize the political moment, and its standard-bearer is facing controversies of his own. Fixing the country will thus ultimately fall on the shoulders of ordinary South Koreans rather than political leaders. To do so, they must overcome the gender divide, generational barriers, and the deluge of misinformation that has rocked the country's politics.

DOWN WITH THE SHIP

South Korean law allows presidents to declare martial law in times of war or during an equivalent public emergency. But when Yoon got on television, there was nothing of the sort: he simply made vague, baseless references to "threats of North Korean communist forces" and pledged "to immediately eradicate the unscrupulous pro-Pyongyang antistate forces that pillage the freedom and happiness of our people and to protect free constitutional order."

Most South Koreans saw through these excuses. But the president's rhetoric had a niche audience. A surging far right in South Korea believes that North Korea is interfering in its elections. (Yoon acted on this particular conspiracy theory by sending soldiers to raid the National Election Commission shortly after he declared martial law.) These South Koreans, mostly aggrieved elderly traditionalists and angry young men, get their news from right-wing YouTube videos. They ignore mainstream journalists and establishment opinion leaders, including conservative ones, who largely condemned Yoon's attempted self-coup.
The South Korean far right is not just Yoon's political base. It is also emerging as the base of his party. As a result, the PPP has not functioned as a restraint on extremism as conservative parties do in healthy democracies, instead remaining loyal to the disgraced president and his diehard followers. The party's leader, who publicly supported impeachment, was replaced on December 16 by a pro-Yoon lawmaker. The few conservative legislators who voted to impeach the president have also found themselves sidelined. Yoon's rabid supporters have shown up in front of the presidential residence waving South Korean and U.S. flags and holding "Stop the Steal"

posters. They are vastly outnumbered by the hundreds of thousands of men and women, young and old, who wave light sticks and sing “Impeach Yoon Suk-yeol.” But the PPP is pandering to a vocal minority rather than discarding Yoon and tacking toward the center.

South Korea’s crisis could hardly come at a worse time.

The party’s reluctance has produced a protracted crisis. The South Korean prime minister, also from the PPP, became acting president after Yoon’s impeachment. But rather than trying to unite the country by shunting Yoon aside, he refused to sign off on the assembly’s appointees to fill three empty seats on the Constitutional Court, jeopardizing the court’s ability to review Yoon’s impeachment. He, too, was then impeached. Next in line to head the caretaker government was the finance minister, who allowed two of the three court appointments. But he vetoed a bill establishing a special counsel to investigate Yoon for the high crime of “insurrection,” a capital offense.

Yoon is being investigated for insurrection anyway by the federal office that investigates corruption accusations against high-ranking officials. But he is doing his utmost to obstruct the inquiry by refusing to cooperate with it and has called on supporters to “fight to the end.” When investigators and police entered the presidential compound on January 3 to detain him for questioning after he refused to respond to previous summons, Yoon had the presidential security service blockade them. Authorities returned with massive force on January 15, and Yoon was arrested. He begrudgingly appeared before the Constitutional Court to defend himself against impeachment but still refuses to answer questions from the corruption investigation office.

This gridlock could hardly come at a worse time. South Korea is one of the most dynamic economies in the world and one of the United States’s most important allies. But it faces a slew of geopolitical and economic challenges. The value of the Korean won has plummeted to levels not seen since the 2008 global financial crisis, and the country’s stock market ended the year as one of the worst performers in Asia. Now that U.S. President Donald Trump has returned to the White House, South Korea’s record trade surplus with the United States could make it a target for tariffs. And South Korea could suffer collateral damage if Trump restarts his trade war with China. Trump is also likely to demand that Seoul foot more of the bill for housing American troops on the peninsula, stress-testing the U.S.-South Korean alliance at a time when North Korea is strengthening its military ties with Russia. As North Korean soldiers gain battlefield experience by joining Russia’s fight against Ukraine, South Korea is essentially without a commander in chief.

BOTTOM-UP DEMOCRACY

South Korea’s immediate crisis will likely end in the months ahead. The Constitutional Court is expected to uphold Yoon’s impeachment: if it does, Koreans will then trudge back to the polls, since an election would have to be held within 60 days of such a ruling. And that election will be the Democrats’ to lose. Should the liberal party win, its president will enjoy a sizable (close to two-thirds) majority in the legislature and be governing a public hungry for real change. The party, in other words, would have a mandate to tackle the roots of problems that made Yoon so unpopular and desperate to begin with: the rising cost of living, a prolonged doctors’ strike,

influence peddling, and corruption. The PPP, meanwhile, would have to rebuild after an electoral trouncing, which could give moderates a chance to drag the party toward the center.

But as Korean conservatives prepare for a long night of wrestling with their demons, liberals are facing troubles of their own. Their most powerful politician, the party leader and legislator Lee Jae-myung, faces a swarm of indictments, mostly stemming from a controversial development project during his years as a city mayor. He was convicted in November of making a false statement during the last presidential campaign in violation of election laws. Despite Lee's legal troubles and often divisive reputation, many liberals still see him as exactly what the country needs: a fighter for the working class who rose from poverty to become a labor lawyer and progressive politician, someone who combines the brashness of Trump with the policies of the progressive U.S. senator Bernie Sanders. Lee, for his part, claims the various charges against him are politically motivated, and he is appealing his conviction. But if the Supreme Court upholds the guilty verdict before a snap election is held, Lee will be disqualified from running, and the Democrats will suddenly be without an obvious front-runner.

Thankfully, the fate of Korean democracy does not rest in any one person's hands, not even the next president's. That is the ultimate lesson of December 3, when, in a moment of crisis, ordinary South Koreans came together. Yes, the lawmakers who raced to their chambers were essential. But so was the crowd that helped them inside and stood up to military troops. So were the journalists who continued reporting despite the gag order. Even the police officers and soldiers who carried out Yoon's outrageous orders did so with a notable lack of enthusiasm. They did not dare use force against the people.

Korean liberals are facing troubles of their own.

Restoring the health of South Korean democracy will require giving this civil society more authority. As the political scientist Erik Mobrand argued in his prescient book *Top-Down Democracy in South Korea*, the country's young democracy is overdue for a bottom-up reform of institutions to increase citizen participation. Elites, Mobrand notes, have manipulated the moment after political crises to limit the influence of grassroots forces. Instead, it is time for the grassroots to demand a more open and inclusive electoral process and party system, with more public participation and less legal regulation. Ordinary South Korean citizens are ready to play such an enhanced role, as they have proved not only through mass protests but also consistently high election turnouts.

To foster more civic engagement, journalists will need to do a better job of reaching groups that are tuning out the mainstream press and falling into rabbit holes of misleading online commentary. Educators also have a big role to play by enhancing civics instruction and teaching young people the politics of problem solving rather than partisanship. Civil society organizations need to help South Koreans better distinguish what's real from what's fake, combating the distortionary effects of the YouTube information ecosystem that emboldens Yoon and his supporters. The country also needs to put more work into bridging its sociopolitical divides, particularly between young and old and between men and women. To that end, the next administration, liberal or conservative, should support intergenerational initiatives that can reinvigorate civic life and promote gender equality. And ultimately, South Koreans may decide

the time has come to revise the constitution, written in 1948 under U.S. military occupation and last revised in 1987 under military dictatorship.

None of these steps will be easy. The country's democracy will face serious struggles, even if Yoon's night of martial law is just a bad memory. But South Korea's citizens are up to the task. If they stopped a military dictatorship overnight, just as they deposed an earlier generation of autocrats, they can right their ship in the years ahead.