
ARGUMENT

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South Korea Shows Justice Can Protect Democracy

The life sentence for Yoon Suk-yeol's coup attempt should be a model for other states.

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By **S. Nathan Park**

On Feb. 19, the Seoul Central District Court sentenced former President Yoon Suk-yeol to life in prison. After a 13-month trial, South Korea has closed at least a chapter—if not the whole book—of Yoon's misbegotten coup attempt on Dec. 3, 2024. While challenges remain, the way in which a relatively young democracy handled the latest threat of authoritarianism should be a lesson for democracies everywhere that are struggling with the resurgence of far-right politics.

For a country where memories of the dictatorship that ended in 1987 are still fresh, the implication of Yoon's martial law declaration was clear: an attempt to end democracy. The first item of Yoon's martial law proclamation—prohibiting “all political activities” and putting “all media and press under control of the martial law”—went even further than those of the Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan dictatorships.

Yoon's plan was foiled because the Korean public and liberal lawmakers moved swiftly, putting their bodies in front of armored cars and paratroopers while National Assembly members voted to lift the declaration. The coup attempt ended with no bloodshed, and Yoon's presidency ended in impeachment shortly after.

Since his impeachment and indictment, Yoon has claimed in court that he only declared martial law to raise awareness on the abuses of the opposition Democratic Party, which supposedly rigged elections. In case after case, the South Korean judiciary rejected that argument. In addition to Yoon's life sentence, former Defense Minister Kim Yong-hyun, who masterminded the martial law plan, was sentenced to 30 years in prison. Former Prime Minister Han Duck-soo, who attempted to give a patina of procedural legitimacy to the coup by having the State Council approve the declaration, was sentenced to 23 years in prison.

Others who participated in the autogolpe, such as police chiefs and the National Assembly security chief who attempted to block lawmakers from entering the legislative hall to lift the martial law decree, also received significant prison sentences. In each ruling, courts repeatedly affirmed: The democracy of the Republic of Korea will not tolerate insurrectionists, no matter what excuse they may give.

The court opinion by Judge Lee Jin-gwan, who sentenced Han, is particularly resonant: “The December 3 insurrection, a top-down insurrection, is incomparably more dangerous than a bottom-up insurrection. An insurrection by the elected power, who disregards the constitution and the law, shakes the foundation of the faith that people have in democracy and in the rule of law.”

The court’s rulings have come in the face of an unrepentant far right. Election-deniers have continued their weekly street rallies, chanting “Yoon Again” and holding out with the delusional hope that U.S. President Donald Trump will sweep in to seize the newly elected South Korean president, Lee Jae-myung, just as he did with former Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro.

Meanwhile, the conservative People Power Party (PPP), which is barely hanging onto its 107 seats in the 300-seat National Assembly, has been unable to distance itself from Yoon. It took more than a year after Yoon’s coup attempt for the PPP to issue a mealy mouthed apology for the martial law declaration. The PPP then quickly expelled members of its minority faction that supported Yoon’s impeachment, supposedly for undermining party unity. After Yoon’s sentencing, PPP leader Jang Dong-hyeok called the ruling “logically flawed” and dismissed the demands to cut ties with Yoon as “sowing the seeds of division.”

But even worse is that the brain rot has gone international. Election-deniers in South Korea have found an audience in the United States. The 2025 Conservative Political Action Conference hosted a Korean delegation that justified Yoon’s martial law as a necessary step to defend against Chinese election interference.

Yoon’s ties with the Unification Church cult also animated Washington conservatives. When “Moonie” cult leader Hak Ja-han was arrested for bribing Yoon’s wife and other prominent conservative politicians, the *Washington Times*—the second-largest newspaper in Washington, D.C., owned by the Unification Church—ran op-eds and quotes from the likes of Newt Gingrich and Mike Pompeo denouncing Korea’s supposed infringement of religious freedom. The conspiracy theories have apparently reached their highest level as even Trump, shortly before his first meeting with Lee, wondered whether there was a “purge or revolution” in South Korea.

But with a life sentence for Yoon, South Korean democracy has once again declared that it is ready to meet these challenges. The ruling offers a crucial lesson for our times: In order to defend democracy, institutions must be galvanized through the public's participation, and no quarter should be given to aspiring authoritarians.

Proceduralist rigor must be accompanied with a passionate commitment for action, like the way that South Korea's lawmakers scaled the walls of the National Assembly's grounds—not to pick up arms but to hold a democratic vote to dissolve Yoon's martial law. The massive protests outside of the Constitutional Court during Yoon's impeachment hearing were not signs of bloodlust or mob rule but of the electorate's resolve to see the rule of law being carried out.

Around the world, a similar resolve appears to be emerging among the democratic peoples. In Canada, Prime Minister Mark Carney had his Liberal Party overcome one of the widest polling gaps in any democracy to secure a resounding victory in the country's 2025 federal election. In the United States, the people of Minneapolis stood in the blistering cold to protest against aggressive immigration authorities. The justice meted out to Yoon is yet another example that a democracy can fight back through the power of participation, election, and the institutions of the rule of law.

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