

ARGUMENT *An expert's point of view on a current event.*

South Koreans Know What Dictatorship Looks Like

Public memory helped fuel the rapid fight to protect democracy.

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Protesters march against South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol following his declaration of martial law in Seoul on Dec. 4. PHILIP FONG/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

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When South Korean legislator Kim Min-seok warned in August that President Yoon Suk-yeol might be plotting to declare martial law, even the most ardent critics of Yoon were skeptical. Of course, the right-wing president was increasingly displaying authoritarian tendencies. In response to his miserably low approval rating, hovering between the high teens and low 20s, as well as mounting corruption allegations against him and his wife, Yoon ordered indiscriminate raids of the offices and residences of liberal politicians and journalists, numerous thinly supported criminal charges against opposition leader Lee Jae-myung, and ostentatious military parades.

But still, the idea that Yoon might attempt martial law and a self-coup—where an existing leader seizes dictatorial power—seemed to be too outlandish. It was seen as partisan fodder,

unbecoming of a lawmaker of Kim's stature—a respected former youth leader of the South Korean democracy movement that ended the military dictatorship of Chun Doo-hwan in 1987. South Korea had not seen martial law since its democratic transition, although a declaration of martial law remained a theoretical possibility in case of a wartime emergency in a hypothetical clash with North Korea.

Then it happened. At 10:23 p.m. local time on Dec. 3, Yoon called an unscheduled press conference. In a six-minute statement, Yoon announced that he was declaring an emergency martial law, claiming that the opposition Democratic Party made the National Assembly “a monster trying to destroy liberal democracy” because the liberal party had brought 22 impeachments against officials in his administration and threatened to slash its discretionary budget. Yoon branded his political opponents as “pro-Pyongyang anti-state forces,” in the same rhetoric that South Korea's military dictators had used to justify their rule.

Within an hour, Gen. Park An-soo was appointed as the commander of the Martial Law Command, which decreed that all political activities in national and local legislatures were prohibited, all media were subject to the control of the Martial Law Command, and public gatherings and rallies were prohibited. Soon, armored cars and helicopters began emerging in the streets of Seoul.

South Korean news anchors reporting the announcements were visibly shaking because they knew, as did most South Koreans, what could be in store. The last time martial law was declared in South Korea was in 1979, in the waning days of Park Chung-hee's dictatorship that later gave way to Chun's. In that martial law period, from October 1979 to January 1981, Chun's paratroopers massacred hundreds of protesters, perhaps thousands, in the southwestern city of Gwangju.

The mass murders in the aftermath of the Gwangju Uprising became one of the defining moments of modern South Korean history, memorialized in the novel *Human Acts* by Han Kang, who won the Nobel Prize in literature in October and is due to give her acceptance speech next week. But in 2024, most South Koreans had regarded the massacre as a distant historical event, a tragic but old incident that their country had put past. The public watched the news in shock as armored cars and helicopters were heading to the National Assembly, where lawmakers had the ability to end martial law by a majority vote.

Fortunately, history did not repeat itself—in part because, as with everything he has done, Yoon executed the *autogolpe* with clownish incompetence. Aspiring authoritarians around the world have long had an established playbook for coups: TV broadcast controlled, the internet jammed, opposition leaders arrested, and checkpoints set up around the city.

The martial law declaration aspired to all of these possibilities, especially control of the media. Yet none of those things happened on the night of Dec. 3. TV cameras roamed freely near the National Assembly Hall, while liberal leaders exhorted the public via social media to protest against Yoon's power grab. Squads were reportedly deployed to arrest key opposition leaders but were too slow to stop them. Soldiers were reluctant to use force, letting themselves be pushed back by unarmed protesters.

Although details are still emerging as of this writing (around 24 hours since the martial law declaration), it appears that Yoon's self-coup attempt was so clumsy because the president could not balance the need to keep his plan secret and the need to get the requisite buy-ins from key players. Reportedly, it was Defense Minister Kim Yong-hyun who suggested declaring martial law. But Kim could only muster a small segment of the military to follow his orders; most of the military and the police remained in their posts. Yoon apparently had no buy-in from conservatives either, as People Power Party leader Han Dong-hoon and Seoul Mayor Oh Se-hoon quickly denounced the coup attempt.

Nevertheless, there were many moments where just one wrong turn could have resulted in chaos and bloodbath. Under the law, the National Assembly can end martial law with a majority vote—but of course, that assumes that the legislators are able to vote. The declaration, completely illegally, forbade the National Assembly from gathering, and armed soldiers were dispatched to patrol outside the Assembly Hall, as helicopters equipped with machine guns hovered over them.

Somehow, the South Korean legislators managed. The protesters led a tense standoff against the special forces deployed to the legislature, blocking the soldiers and armored cars while opening a path for lawmakers to enter the building. Democratic Party spokesperson Ahn Gwi-ryeong wrestled an armed soldier with her bare hands before going into the building. Lee, the Democratic leader, showed surprising athleticism for a 60-year-old as he hopped over the walls to avoid the soldiers in front of the building—while livestreaming a video of himself to boot. Thankfully, not a shot was fired.



Soldiers try to enter the National Assembly building in Seoul on Dec. 4, after South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol declared martial law.

Once in the building, the lawmakers and their aides barricaded the entrance and opened the legislative session at 12:49 a.m. Assembly Speaker Woo Won-shik emphasized that proper parliamentary procedure must be followed to leave no doubt about the result, even as paratroopers broke a window to enter the building and legislative aides pushed them back with fire extinguishers and cellphone flashes.

At 1:01 a.m., after 12 agonizing minutes of typing up the bill and submitting it in accordance with the parliamentary procedure, the 190 out of 300 Assembly members who could manage to enter the hall, including 18 legislators of Yoon's own party, unanimously voted to end martial law. After a few moments of hesitation, the helicopters and armored cars, then the soldiers, began leaving the hall. Even after the vote, there remained a question whether Yoon would honor the National Assembly vote. The legislators remained in the hall, fearing that Yoon might redeploy the military or declare martial law once again. But at 4:27 a.m., the defeated and humiliated Yoon held a press conference to announce that he would lift martial law.

As of this writing, the situation remains fluid. But it does not appear likely that Yoon will be able to finish out the remainder of his term, which runs until 2027. The Democratic Party demanded that Yoon resign immediately or face impeachment proceedings, which require a two-thirds majority of the 300-seat Assembly. Although Yoon's party holds a slim buffer with 108 legislators, the president's coup attempt is likely to be enough to peel off at least eight lawmakers, since 18 of them already voted to end martial law.

Yoon may choose to resign rather than to face the ignominy—though he might still be prosecuted. South Korea has an illustrious history of prosecuting and jailing its former presidents, including two out of the past three presidents, Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye, both conservatives.

However it ends, Yoon's presidency will serve as a reminder of the resilience of South Korean democracy. South Korea's first martial law situation in more than four decades ended in approximately six hours, based on a parliamentary vote, with no casualties and not a single shot fired. One errant bullet could have changed the course of history, but the overwhelming weight of democratic norms, physically manifest in a protesting public and the parliamentarians calmly voting in the face of ongoing assault, stayed the hands of the soldiers.

On the other hand, it is another embarrassment for South Korean conservatives, who miraculously came back from the impeachment of their last president, Park, in 2017 to recapture the presidency in a narrow win in 2022 based mostly on grievances about high housing costs. This latest episode will do little to help right-wing leaders shed their reputation as the descendants of military dictators with a streak of authoritarianism that could flare up at the first sign of trouble. The so-called reasonable conservatives, the smaller cadre of right-leaning moderates who think vainly that they can work within the system to change it, will once again have to impeach their own president.

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