

[Column] The maddening farce of Yoon Suk-yeol's presidency

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Unprincipled, lawless, ignorant and incompetent — how perilous to place a nation in the hands of such a leader!



A TV in Seoul Station plays a news broadcast of President Yoon Suk-yeol's address following the passage of a motion for his impeachment on Dec. 14, 2024. (Yonhap)



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The wild whiplash of our current president's behavior is not only dizzying, but maddening.

After declaring martial law on Dec. 3, Yoon Suk-yeol soon lifted it and offered a public apology. Then on Dec. 12, he asserted that the martial law declaration was a “high-level act of state” and promised and promised to “fight until the very end.”

This ridiculous tragicomedy ultimately pushed the National Assembly to pass a bill of impeachment against Yoon, suspending his authority as president.

Four aspects of Yoon's presidential behavior indicate that impeachment was indeed the only option.

First, Yoon was an unprincipled president, pursuing his impulses in disregard of widely held values and the proper course of action.

His oft-repeated slogan was an “international coalition for liberal democracy.” But in reality, Yoon was an enemy of liberal democracy.

Yoon declared martial law on the pretext of defending liberal democracy from the threat of “anti-state forces” seeking to overthrow the Republic of Korea. But that very declaration represented an attempt to tear down Korea’s constitutional order as a liberal democracy.

In a liberal democracy, the state is merely a collective of individuals — a neutral vessel designed to reflect citizens’ interests and preferences. Furthermore, the president is the people’s representative, or more accurately, their servant.

But Yoon viewed himself as the master, equating himself with the state. So he was quick to smear anybody hostile to himself as part of “anti-state forces.” That’s what I mean by calling him “unprincipled.”

Yoon shrilly denounced the opposition’s tactical use of impeachment, legislation and budget bills. But such practices are frequently seen in advanced democracies. Taking that as a pretext for declaring martial law and suppressing the opposition is a total rejection of liberal democracy. Second, Yoon was a lawless president. He declared martial law even though the requisite conditions — namely, the outbreak of a war or some other military emergency — had not been satisfied.

In addition, his mobilization of the military in an attempt to neutralize the constitutional authority of the National Assembly and to seize data from computer servers at the National Election Commission (another constitutional body) was manifestly illegal and unconstitutional.

After Yoon declared martial law, he issued an arrest list that included the speaker of the National Assembly, the leaders of the ruling and opposition parties, politicians critical of him, journalists, former Supreme Court justices, and a sitting judge who had acquitted the opposition party leader. That act was a grave violation of the rule of law and the constitutional principle of the separation of powers. Such behavior is befuddling given Yoon’s legal background as former head of Korea’s prosecution service.

Third, Yoon was an ignorant president. He had a weak understanding of the objective facts behind his policy agenda and had a tendency to put stock in “fake news” that he would then promote.

That became apparent in his fourth statement to the public. He claimed the troops mobilized at the National Assembly had been few in number, but that turned out to be a falsehood.

That was hardly the only lie: he asserted that the National Assembly’s special activity budget had increased when it had actually shrunk, and he made the false claim that the budget for supporting a nuclear project in the Czech Republic had been slashed by 90%. Yoon wasn’t telling the truth when he said that reducing the emergency fund would make it impossible to respond to natural disasters, and his claim about a unilateral cut in child care assistance was inaccurate as well.

Yoon made the farfetched claim that his declaration of martial law had been intended as a warning. “My purpose was to inform the public about the opposition parties’ heinous anti-state behavior and to warn them to cease such behavior,” he said.

But there’s overwhelming evidence to contradict that claim. He insisted during the statement that he’d ordered troops not to interfere with the National Assembly, but that’s apparently not what he said in six separate phone calls to the commissioner of the Korean National Police Agency after declaring martial law. “Bring them all in. Arrest them for violating martial law,” he has been quoted as saying.

Yoon claimed that the “opposition party’s dictatorial and violent control of legislation” had created “a state of government paralysis,” leaving “social order [. . .] in chaos and the government [. . .] unable to perform its administrative and jurisdictional tasks,” and voiced concerns about Korea becoming “a heaven for spies, a den for drugs and a nation of gang violence.” But that was little better than inflammatory fearmongering with no objective evidence to back it up.

Finally, Yoon was an incompetent president. His political skill and execution added up to zero.

Politics is the art of making the impossible possible. But Yoon practiced a negative-sum politics of making even the possible impossible.

Yoon was accustomed to the uniquely rigid hierarchy and top-down chain of command in the prosecution service. As such, he not only failed to appreciate the virtue of listening but was also totally untutored in conflict mediation and resolution.

In short, he was a leader better suited for autocracy than democracy.

There were also serious issues with Yoon’s executive ability. Flaws in command and control were readily apparent, for example, in his martial law declaration. He wrecked the reputations and careers of well-meaning and talented individuals in the military and police by making them accomplices in his insurrection.

How perilous to place a nation in the hands of such a leader!

When former President Park Geun-hye was impeached in 2016, a proverb was often cited about a foolish and weak ruler who takes the wrong path and sends the world spiraling into chaos. But Yoon isn’t the foolish and weak ruler of that proverb — rather, he’s foolish and reckless.

We’re just lucky the bill of impeachment managed to clear the National Assembly. Now it’s time to watch carefully to see what fate lies in store for the ringleader of an insurrection at the Constitutional Court.

Please direct questions or comments to [english@hani.co.kr]