

## Making Sense of South Korea's Senseless Martial Law Declaration

This article is part of an ongoing series providing expert commentary on the evolving situation in South Korean politics.

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### Abstract

*On 3 December 2024, South Korean **President Yoon Suk Yeol** declared martial law, the first time such an order had been given since the country democratized in 1987. Koreans and international observers alike are puzzled as to why Yoon would take such a drastic measure. This article argues that competing visions of the history of South Korea's military dictatorship era, in which the Korean right views the left as pro-North Korea and the left views the right as Japanese collaborators and an obstacle to democratization, contributed to an atmosphere in which cooperation among the two major political parties is near impossible. Within this setting, Yoon in particular worked closely with New Right academics who seek to justify previous military dictators and seemingly became taken with contemporary far-right election fraud conspiracies. As a result, Yoon came to see martial law as a legitimate means to advance his agenda.*

### The Unthinkable Happened

On 3 December 2024, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol did something most Koreans thought was no longer possible: declared martial law. While thankfully there was no bloodshed, many worried that the outcome would be messy as South Koreans recalled other infamous dates in their history such as 4.3 (Jeju Uprising), 5.16 (Park Chung Hee's military coup), 12.12 (Chun Doo Hwan's military insurrection), and, perhaps most pointedly, 5.18 (the Gwangju Democracy Movement). On 17 May 1980, the Chun Doo Hwan-led military government declared martial law and between 18 and 27 May violently repressed democracy protests in the southwestern city of Gwangju. Park Chan-dae, floor leader of the opposition Democratic Party, during his 14 December remarks before the vote on Yoon's impeachment, invoked Nobel Laureate Han Kang's novel *Human Acts* about the Gwangju Democracy Movement and declared that the memories of May 1980 had safely steered South Korea through December 2024 (Kang 2024).

By now most are familiar with the course of events of that night: Yoon declared martial law at roughly 10:30 pm on 3 December; just after 1:00 am on 4 December, the National Assembly unanimously passed a motion demanding the repeal of martial law; and at roughly 4:30 am Yoon made a brief televised statement saying the martial law order would be rescinded (Kim and Park 2024). At first glance Yoon's martial law declaration seemed a

clumsy attempt at a self-coup, but as more details emerge it is becoming clear that South Korea's democracy barely survived. Troops of South Korea's Special Warfare Command were deployed to the National Assembly and told by Yoon himself to block the National Assembly vote to lift martial law. The Speaker of the National Assembly, Woo Won-shik, had to climb a wall just to enter the building. Leaders of both major political parties, including Yoon's own People Power Party (PPP), were supposed to be arrested. Soldiers and police with weapons drawn confronted angry but unarmed citizens and staff of the National Assembly. Seemingly the self-restraint exercised by the military is the only thing that prevented Yoon from securing a wholesale take over.

Yet the brevity of martial law and its relatively peaceful passing does not mean the shock and anxiety has subsided in South Korea. Nor does the narrow margin by which impeachment passed on 14 December (204 out of 300 members voted in favor; a two-thirds majority is required) reflect the near universal disapproval of Yoon's actions (85 percent according to a poll released on 13 December) (*Korea Times* 2024).

Most people in South Korea on 3 December, including myself, were completely shocked when our smartphones lit up with news alerts that the president had declared martial law. Why? What does this mean for our futures? How could he do this? These questions, and a variety of derogatory epithets, were on the lips of many South Koreans as the events unfolded, save those who luckily slept through martial law that night. Now that the immediate danger is (hopefully) behind us, Korean friends, colleagues, and students have mostly been expressing a sense of embarrassment. Several times I have heard various versions of, "It's 2024. How could this happen in South Korea today? I'm so embarrassed." Yet we are still left grappling with the questions of: why did this happen, and what does it mean for the future of Korean democracy and politics?

## **Stage Set Before Yoon Takes Office**

Almost no one in South Korea, not this author nor international observers of the country, saw martial law coming. In August 2024, Democratic Party lawmaker Kim Min-seok's warning that a martial law declaration was imminent was mostly pushed aside as partisan banter (Yoon 2024). And for good reason. South Korea displayed, and arguably still displays, many indicators of an established and consolidated democracy. Since democratization in 1987, Freedom House (2024) has consistently ranked South Korea among the "free" countries of the world. South Korea passed the Huntington (1991: 266) "two-turnover test" of democratic consolidation when Kim Dae Jung became the first opposition party candidate to win the presidency in 1997 and then power was returned to the conservatives in 2007. And Yoonkyung Lee (2017) was certainly not alone in thinking, or at least hoping, that the impeachment of Park Geun-hye in 2017 displayed "dramatic people power" which would "undergird South Korean democracy in the future and mark a departure from previous politics."

In hindsight, there were warning signs. Political scientists have lamented South Korea's weak party system (Shin 2020) and deepening polarization (Cheong and Haggard 2023). Aram Hur and Andrew Yeo (2024) argue that South Korea's polarization is characterized by competing nationalisms embodied in the conservative and progressive political parties, respectively, resulting in a competition to capture the state by whatever means necessary and, consequently, a ceiling to democratic consolidation. The nationalisms of the Korean left and right were defined during the Cold War era in which consecutive right-wing authoritarians justified their rule in the name of anti-communism whereas the Korean left

challenged the right by highlighting its legacy as collaborators with Japanese colonialism and role in perpetuating the division of the Korean Peninsula. South Korea's negotiated, elite-led democratization process in the late 1980s resulted in a "conservative democracy" with neither side's nationalism being universally accepted (Choi 2012).

Time has certainly not tamed the mutual hostility between the left and right in Korea. After the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 wrecked the Korean economy, a wave of authoritarian nostalgia known as the "Park Chung Hee syndrome" washed through South Korea as older South Koreans remembered fondly the years of rapid economic growth during Park's developmental dictatorship (Kang 2010). This syndrome helped elevate Park's daughter, Park Geun-hye, into the presidency in 2012. Simultaneously, an academic and political movement known as the "New Right" emerged. New Right scholars sought to redefine South Korea's contemporary history by portraying authoritarians Park Chung Hee and Syngman Rhee as the fathers of South Korea's economic and political success rather than tyrants that were overthrown. Nuance was pushed aside for simplified clarity and choosing a "side."

To be certain, there were policy differences between the left and right, particularly when it came to North Korea. But this Manichean view of history led the two major parties to view the other as illegitimate and compromise became increasingly difficult. During her presidency, Park Geun-hye sought to nationalize the writing of history textbooks to make the New Right and conservative perceptions of history the official position (Choe 2015), a move seen by the opposition Democratic Party as an attack against their founding political narrative. Following Park's impeachment, Moon Jae-in adopted the phrase "eradication of deep-rooted evils" (깊은 뿌리를 뽑는다) as a campaign pledge. First used by Park Geun-hye in 2014, the phrase originally connotated rooting out corruption in South Korean society such as the loose enforcement of regulations that led to the sinking of the *Sewol* in April 2014. However, Moon's continued use of the phrase in conjunction with prosecution and imprisonment of both former presidents Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye during his term led to the impression he was persecuting or seeking to "eradicate" the conservative party rather than partner with them as a legitimate opposition party. As a result, numerous analyses argued democracy was deteriorating under Moon's watch (Shin 2022; Shin and Kim 2022).

Seen with this long yardstick, Yoon's declaration of martial law was extreme, but not completely out of character in South Korea's contentious democracy. In fact, it was not even the first time South Korea has had a brush with martial law since democratization in 1987. During the final days of the Park Geun-hye administration, a plan for martial law was drafted and it included similar points emphasized by Yoon during his plot such as preventing the National Assembly from reaching a quorum to nullify the declaration (Kim N. 2024). However, this historical context only set the stage; Yoon's unique political vulnerability combined with an apparent taste for right-wing conspiracy theories seem to be the immediate catalysts.

## **Yoon Suk Yeol and the Korean Far Right**

Yoon Suk Yeol bested Lee Jae-myung in the 2022 presidential election by a mere 247,000 votes. Following Yoon's inauguration on 10 May 2022, his approval rating dipped below 50 percent in mid-June and then below 40 percent in mid-July and would never recover. His approval rating has not topped 30 percent since March 2024 (Gallup Korea 2024).

In short, Yoon has never had a strong mandate, but you would not know it from his ruling

style. Yoon has been described by many as an obstinate political novice who is out of touch with the people (Park 2024). He was famously mocked by voters bringing spring onions to polling stations during the 2024 general election, a nod to his clueless remark about the price of groceries (Mackenzie 2024). Until he declared martial law, the most significant political battle was over his wife, Kim Keon Hee, who has been accused of plagiarizing her doctoral dissertation, stock manipulation, and accepting a bribe in the form of a Dior handbag. Yoon tried to stem the criticism with an apology and lengthy press conference in early November 2024, but to no avail. Yoon himself has claimed in his speeches regarding martial law that he has been under constant political attack from the opposition Democratic Party. Being backed into a political corner does not justify declaring martial law, but it does help us to understand Yoon's perspective.

Still, why would Yoon make such a drastic decision? Yoon was not always seen as a far-right, authoritarian president. During his campaign for the presidency, Yoon emphasized "pragmatism" and established a "Saesidae (New Era) Preparatory Committee" (Noh 2021). Immediately after his inauguration, Yoon took nearly all members of the ruling PPP to Gwangju to participate in a ceremony commemorating the May 18 Gwangju Democracy Movement of 1980, a significant signal that Yoon was aiming to move beyond the authoritarian legacy of the conservative party (Kim 2022). Yoon seemed to be signaling he wanted to build a new legacy for conservatives. He famously repeated his belief in the universal values of liberal democracy and human rights. But two and a half years later, Yoon had not only failed to move beyond the politics of the past but had seemingly dragged Korea back to 1980.

Despite these early signs Yoon would take the conservative party in a new direction, there were numerous counter signals that conservative politics were still trapped in the past. In December 2022, Yoon appointed Kim Kwang-dong to lead the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, an independent body that investigates human rights violations associated with various periods of Korean modern history including the Japanese colonial era, Korean War, and democratization movement. Kim is a New Right academic who participated in writing of the Park Geun-hye administration's official history textbook and has dabbled in history conspiracy theories such as North Korean involvement in the May 18 Gwangju Democracy Movement (Engel 2023). In June 2023, Yoon appointed another New Right figure Kim Yung-ho to be his new Minister of Unification (Lee 2023). Kim also moonlighted as a far-right YouTuber, a detail that has recently grown in importance.

Yoon's decision to draw upon New Right academics to fill political posts was initially a curious oddity to those who monitored Korea's history wars, but in hindsight it was a harbinger of what was to come. Borrowing ideas from modernization theory, the core of the New Right argument is that authoritarian rule was justified in that it produced South Korea's rapid economic rise, laying the foundation for democratization, and also protected South Korea from being consumed by the communist North (Yang 2021). In other words, authoritarianism or authoritarian acts are justified if it is in the long-term interest of the nation. Yoon seemingly drew upon these arguments in his declaration justifying martial law on 3 December:

Our National Assembly has become a den of criminals, paralyzing the nation's judicial and administrative systems through legislative dictatorship and planning for the overthrow of our liberal democracy...I declare martial law to protect the Republic of Korea from the threats of North Korean communist forces, to immediately eradicate the unscrupulous pro-Pyongyang anti-state forces that pillage the freedom and

happiness of our people and to protect the free constitutional order...[Martial law] is an inevitable measure to guarantee the people's freedom, safety and national sustainability against the actions of anti-state forces seeking to overthrow the system. (Chea 2024)

Yoon was reaching back to the authoritarian tradition of justifying his actions in the name of the greater good. The speech echoes closely that given on 17 May 1980 by Choi Kyu Ha, the acting president after Park Chung Hee's assassination who was quietly controlled by Chun Doo Hwan after his military insurrection in December 1979:

It is expected that armed agents of the North Korean communist group will continue to infiltrate our country for the purpose of creating social chaos in our society to advance the goal of communizing South Korea, and this danger is increasing day by day as social unrest continues... Social unrest is growing worse as leading politicians, who should be taking the lead in restoring order are instead instigating social instability, and turning a blind eye to the government's efforts to maintain order...As a result, the government was forced to take significant action to protect the country and the right of the survival of the 37 million Korean citizens after considering the wishes of the majority of people. (*Kyunghyang Shinmun* 1980)

Both speeches highlight how political groups in South Korea opposing government policies or actions are both a minority and associated with North Korea, and that martial law is justified in the name of protecting the majority. Although it is difficult to know at this time, hopefully the ongoing investigation into Yoon's martial law declaration will reveal more about whether Yoon was influenced into adopting this position by advisors in his administration or if it was a belief he carried into the presidency.

However, it is important to note that this decades-long ideological battle between Korea's left and right was not the only far-right influence weighing on Yoon during his decision to implement martial law. Understandably ignored amid the battle over the National Assembly on 3-4 December was the fact that troops had been deployed to the National Election Commission (NEC). Not only that, but more troops in total were deployed to three NEC buildings than to the National Assembly building to stop the vote on martial law.<sup>1</sup>

It was quickly revealed that troops had been ordered to the NEC by Yoon to secure evidence of election fraud in previous elections (Yang 2024). Far-right accusations of election fraud have been stirring in South Korea since the 2020 general election, but they had been limited to the fringes of the political world with sitting lawmakers refusing to dabble in conspiracy. Yoon had never publicly endorsed baseless rumors of election fraud, but, in his televised 30-minute speech on 12 December justifying his martial law declaration, Yoon leaned into the conspiracy theory stating he had received evidence the NEC was hacked by North Korea and was unable to conduct a proper investigation due to the NEC's independent nature (Choi 2024).

Where did Yoon get the idea that the NEC was corrupt or that elections were fraudulent? Was it a real concern based on intelligence? It's impossible to answer these questions definitively at the moment. But that has not stopped the Korean media and people from speculating that Yoon was swallowed by the YouTube algorithm and became a binge watcher of far-right YouTube videos. "Producer's Note" (PD의 노트), an investigative journalism program on MBC, aired a review of Yoon's relationship with far-right YouTube and the election fraud conspiracy theories on 9 December. Yoon's former head of policy coordination

during his presidential election campaign revealed a document from 29 December 2021 which showed Yoon and his advisors had been concerned about electoral fraud in the 2020 general election since before Yoon took office. And a former colleague of Yoon's at the prosecutors' office stated Yoon participated in far-right political protests and consumed large amounts of far-right YouTube content (Kim S. 2024).

Whether or not Yoon came into the office a secret consumer of right-wing media or was influenced by it later is less important than the clear impact election fraud conspiracies are having on South Korean politics. Nor should we assume that these new right-wing conspiracies will remain distinct from the New Right and the old ideological battle described above. In August 2024, a banner promoting the conspiracy theory that North Korea had been the force behind the May 18 Gwangju Democracy Movement of 1980 was reported to the police. This banner was hung by a group led by former National Assembly lawmaker Min Kyung-wook who has been a leader in the election fraud conspiracy circles since 2020 (Kim Y. 2024). In other words, Yoon seems to be bridging various facets of Korean far-right politics from the academic movement of the New Right to far-right election fraud conspiracy theories.

## **Future of Korean Democracy**

The resistance to Yoon's declaration of martial law on 3 December has reaffirmed the Korean people's passion for democracy. The few who rushed to the National Assembly that night were reinforced by hundreds of thousands of protesters on 7 December and 14 December when the votes on the impeachment motion were held. I have no doubt that had Yoon succeeded in stopping the National Assembly from voting on 3 December that the people would have forced an end to martial law in the following days or weeks.

But we should be careful not to declare a victory for people power as may have been done by too many after Park Geun-hye's impeachment. The forces and institutions that led us to 12.3 remain in place. Korean politics are still polarized. YouTube algorithms will continue to funnel viewers into echo chambers. And it is unclear if this will finally be the moment that the Korean Constitution is amended to weaken the imperial presidency.

Is there hope for a better tomorrow? I think so. On 7 December, as the National Assembly held the first vote on impeachment which ultimately failed to reach a quorum, PPP lawmaker Kim Sangwook, seemingly on the verge of tears, gave a passionate speech calling for his colleagues to vote on impeachment to fulfill their duty to the people (YTN 2024). After Yoon had been impeached a week later, Kim gave a damning indictment of his party: "Within the PPP there is a mix of rational conservatives and far-right members who defend military dictatorship and the emergency martial law declaration and who only seek opportunities to seize power." He went on to call for his party to embrace a political base of moderate "rational" conservatives rather than "violent" extremists.

Kim is only a single lawmaker, but his message is a clear and powerful call for the main conservative party of Korea to finally sever its linkage with the military dictators of a bygone era, just as the Korean people have done. If they do not, the "liberal democracy" they claim to be defending will cease to exist.

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## Note

1. Some have argued that the small number of troops deployed to the National Assembly is evidence that Yoon never intended to subvert democracy and he was merely giving a "warning" to the country about the threat posed by the opposition party to South Korea's democracy and livelihood. I do not find such arguments valid, however, given testimony that Yoon ordered the arrest of leading politicians and instructed military commanders to halt the vote.

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