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South Korea's Democracy after an *Autogolpe* Attempt: Wounds by a Thousand Cuts

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On December 3, 2024, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol declared martial law, temporarily suspending the operation of constitutional democracy in the country. Even though the National Assembly passed a resolution urging the repeal of martial law a few hours later and Yoon agreed to lift the declaration, the activation of presidential emergency powers has produced devastating political upheavals that have persisted for a month. Despite the National Assembly's adoption of motions to impeach the incumbent president on December 14 and the acting president two weeks later, the ongoing crisis in South Korea and its democratic backsliding are likely to end up with political chaos or even a civil-war-like situation. In contrast to those who perceive the nation's democratic resilience in the juncture, South Korea's constitutional democracy is experiencing significant challenges.¹

Yoon's *Autogolpe* and Public Reactions

For starters, Yoon is currently the subject of an investigation by the public prosecutors on the grounds of alleged orchestration of an attempted insurrection, a crime that carries with it a sentence of life imprisonment or even the death penalty. Notably, the South Korean president has immunity from most criminal charges except for insurrection or treason. Consequently, the prospect of the incumbent president being charged with criminal offenses would be a historic first in the country. While the constitution of South Korea grants the president the authority to employ the military to maintain order in 'war, armed conflict or similar national emergency,' it also confers upon the National Assembly the power to lift martial law by a majority vote. The police, public prosecutors, and other agencies suspect that Yoon imposed martial law in a situation that did not meet the constitutional standard of a severe crisis. Moreover, they accuse Yoon of insurrection due to the deployment of troops to seal the National Assembly, which amounted to this crime. According to scholars of authoritarian politics, there is little doubt that Yoon's brief imposition of martial law was an example of what political scientists call an '*autogolpe*,' or a 'self-coup' (Chin and Wright 2024).

In his December 12 address to the public, Yoon denied all the accusations of treason, asserting that the president's decision to declare martial law is an act of governance that is not subject to judicial review. Furthermore, he attributed the blame to the Democratic Party of Korea (DPK), the main opposition party, suggesting that the DPK had compelled him to declare martial law by labeling it as treason. He also expressed frustration with the DPK, claiming that "the opposition party is doing a

¹ For the optimistic view on the state of democracy in South Korea, see Goel (2024). For the pessimistic view, see Cha (2024).

madness sword dance, calling emergency declaration of martial law treason ... which force is paralyzing state affairs and subverting the national constitution in South Korea?” Furthermore, he reiterated unfounded conspiracy theories propagated by far-right extremists, asserting that “anti-state and pro-North Korea forces” have manipulated the results of the National Assembly elections held in April 2024. Concluding the address, he argued that the attempt was a legal decision to prevent the ‘collapse of democracy’ and counter the opposition’s alleged pursuit of a ‘parliamentary dictatorship.’ He further asserted, “I will fight to the end.”

According to the public opinion survey released following day, 71 percent of citizens agreed to the assessment that Yoon’s declaration of martial law was an attempted insurrection, and 75 percent expressed support for the impeachment of Yoon (Gallup Korea 2024). This public opinion has remained relatively stable subsequent to the observation of the debacles of martial law and the following impeachment of Yoon by lawmakers. According to a survey conducted by the Dong-A Ilbo on December 28-29, 67 percent of surveyed Koreans answered that insurrection crime charge should be applied to the previous martial law, and 70 percent expressed their belief that the Constitutional Court should uphold the impeachment of Yoon by lawmakers (Kim 2025). The gap between Yoon’s address and the citizens’ evaluation clearly reveals one of the perils inherent in presidential democracies: the potential for a president’s actions, driven by a misguided perception of the world decoupled from that of the average citizen, to adversely impact democratic institutions and processes for personal, partisan, or other interest.

Profound Damage to Democratic Achievement of South Korea

It is ironic that South Korean citizens had elected and been governed by an illiberal president, since President Yoon has vowed to strengthen liberal democracy of the country. A recent study on the illiberal winds in liberal democracies has attributed this trend to partisan polarization, extremism, populism, or executive aggrandizement. The convergence of these factors has resulted in the election of a less qualified political leader. Drezner once described President Trump as a ‘toddler-in-chief’ with ‘temper tantrums, short attention span, poor impulse control, oppositional behavior, knowledge deficits, and too much screen time,’ and how he had transformed the most powerful office in the country into a political day care facility.² President Yoon has been also characterized by similar leadership style.

In the context of a sharply divided political environment, South Korea’s political institutions have lost one of its most significant epistemic capacities: the ability to avoid adverse selection when citizens delegate their authority to the president, thereby easily transforming its democracy into a *kakistocracy*, a government led by the worst, least qualified, or most unscrupulous citizens.³

A case in point is the recent impeachment of President Yoon. The National Assembly voted to impeach Yoon in its second attempt, garnering more than two-thirds of the required support a week later, following the initial attempt’s failure due to a boycott by his governing People Power Party (PPP). Over the past twenty-five years, this marks the third instance in which the National Assembly has submitted a presidential impeachment resolution to the Constitutional Court, which has up to 180 days to determine its acceptance or rejection.

² For the deleterious impact of having a person ill-suited to the presidency on democracy, see Drezner (2020).

³ For the meaning of the *kakistocracy*, see Krugman (2024).

The previous impeachment of then-President Park Geun-hye garnered the support of 234 members of the 300-member National Assembly. The results indicated that 62 of the 128 lawmakers from Park's Saenuri Party, the current PPP, voted in favor of her impeachment. In the case of Yoon's impeachment, only 12 of the 108 PPP lawmakers voted for Yoon's impeachment. The PPP had a traumatic experience of party breakup when the group supporting Park's impeachment formed a new party. Accordingly, the PPP sought an alternative solution that could not be plausible under the opposition party-controlled National Assembly. Han Dong-hoon, the PPP's leader, who urged to repeal martial law immediately and later agreed to impeach Yoon, was forced to resign by a majority of the party. The PPP subsequently appointed five-term lawmaker Kwon Yong-se as the head of its emergency, entrusted with the management of the ensuing political ramifications. Notably, Kwon's stance on the repeal of martial law and the impeachment initiative stood in contrast to those of Han Dong-hoon, underscoring the internal divisions with the PPP. Like Yoon, the serious cognitive dissonance of PPP legislators has to be deleterious to democracy.

This remarkable shift in the majority of PPP legislators, who have chosen to support Yoon rather than abandon him, is primarily driven by their partisan interest in delaying a presidential election following the Court's affirmation of the impeachment. DPK leader Lee Jae-myung is currently facing multiple criminal charges, and the court has found him guilty of violating the public official election act. Lee is awaiting a higher court ruling, expected in late spring. This partisan preoccupation has led to the neglect of crucial efforts to restore the democratic process at this critical juncture. As Levitsky and Ziblatt contend in *Tyranny of the Minority*, to be considered loyal democrats, politicians "must respect the outcome of free and fair elections, win or lose." Secondly, politicians "who support military coups, organize putsches, incite insurrections, plot bombings, assassinations, and other terrorist acts, or deploy militias or thugs to beat up opponents or intimidate voters are not democrats." Thirdly, politicians "must always break with antidemocratic forces." The guidance concludes with the warning: "Their response eventually played a subtle but decisive role in killing democracy itself" (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2023).

Opposition's Constitutional Hardball Game

Last but not the least, the DPK passed a motion to impeach the Acting President Han Duck-soo less than two weeks after the National Assembly's vote to impeach Yoon. As Han deferred the appointment of three Constitutional Court justices who had been recommended by the National Assembly, the DPK acted on its prior warnings to pursue impeachment. Han becomes the first Acting President to be impeached in the country.⁴ During the Yoon's tenure from 2023 to 2024, the DPK pursued impeachment proceedings against public officials 29 times, which is more than the 21 times recorded from 1985 to 2022. The DPK's legislative strategies can be characterized as 'constitutional hardball,' defined as "a form of institutional combat aimed at permanently defeating one's partisan rivals, regardless of the impact on democratic processes." Another warning on constitutional hardball tactics comes as following: "an unstrained Congress can block the president's every move, threaten to throw the country into chaos by refusing to fund the government, or vote to remove the president on dubious grounds" (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018).

⁴ On December 31, 2024, the new acting President Choi Sang-mok appointed two out of three vacant Constitutional Court justices so that a ruling on Yoon's impeachment will proceed without any procedural controversies.

The constitutional hardball game that the DPK has played during this constitutional crisis exemplifies the party's transformation into a populist partisan organization, driven by extremist supporters. The DPK's threat to use serial constitutional hardball tactics to remove Acting-Acting President was only halted after the tragic incident of a plane crash at Muan International Airport in South Korea, which claimed the lives of 179 out of 181 passengers and crew. In other words, only a national disaster of unprecedented scale could stop fierce partisan bickering between DPK and PPP even under constitutional crisis. The complete dysfunction of South Korea's institutions responsible for monitoring and restraining executive public officials, including political parties and legislative organizations, is evident. In short, South Korea's political institutions have lost one of their most important epistemic capacities to avoid the moral hazard of political agents, which could easily transform its democracy into a *vetocracy*, or a government whereby no single entity can acquire enough power to make decisions and take effective charge.⁵

Conclusion

South Koreans have been proud of their democratic achievements. Furthermore, all reports ranking global democracy used to put the country to a high-level liberal democracy. Currently, however, South Koreans are compelled to engage in painful reflections on their loopholes of their democratic institutions and their own electoral choices.

In the near term, the viability of South Korea's constitutional democracy is likely to be uncertain due to the aftershocks of Yoon's *autogolpe*. Despite the citizens' ability to navigate their constitutional crisis, the prevailing democratic fragility in the country is likely to persist. South Korea's constitutional democracy would regain its strength only after it survives from severe wounds by a thousand cuts. ■

⁵ For the meaning of the *vetocracy*, see Klein (2016).

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