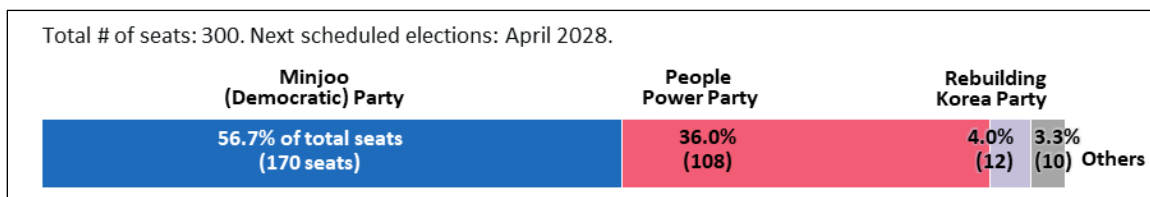


South Korean Political Crisis: Martial Law and Impeachment

Updated December 31, 2024

In December 2024, South Korea plunged into a political crisis that could have significant implications for U.S. interests, including U.S. policies toward North Korea, China, Japan, and Russia. At around 10:25 p.m. on December 3, after months of [escalating tension](#) and political gridlock between the executive and the opposition-controlled National Assembly (**Figure 1**), President Yoon Suk-Yeol [declared](#) martial law “to protect the constitutional order” from the left-of-center opposition party, the Democratic Party (DP), and its allies. Yoon has described these opposition parties as pro-North Korean “[anti-state forces](#).” Yoon dispatched military and police forces to the National Assembly complex to prevent it from convening and reportedly to [arrest party leaders](#). Most legislators—some of whom came of age [protesting against South Korea’s military government](#) in the 1970s and 1980s—managed to evade or break through the security cordon.

Figure 1. Party Strength in the National Assembly



Source: Republic of Korea National Assembly.

At 1:00 a.m. on December 4, the National Assembly voted 190-0 to demand Yoon rescind his order. (The National Assembly can [override](#) a martial law decree.) Shortly before 4:30 a.m., Yoon lifted martial law. (**Table 1**.)

Later on December 4, opposition parties jointly filed a motion of impeachment against Yoon and key members of his government. A December 7 vote narrowly failed, with almost all of Yoon’s People Power Party (PPP) representatives boycotting the proceedings. A second vote on December 14 succeeded, with [12 PPP representatives](#) voting in favor. Factors influencing PPP members’ shift appear to have been Yoon’s [public defiance](#) and polls indicating Yoon’s approval ratings—which had been in the 20%-30%

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range for most of his tenure—had dipped [below the teens](#). Over 70% of Koreans polled [supported impeachment](#), and tens of thousands of protestors, as well as many [civil society groups](#), mobilized in support of impeachment. Following his impeachment, Yoon was suspended from office and [Prime Minister Han Duk-soo](#) became Acting President. On December 27, however, following disagreements with Han, the National Assembly impeached him. Finance Minister Choi Sang-mok became Acting President.

Next Steps

Yoon's impeachment goes to South Korea's Constitutional Court for a trial, which must be decided within 180 days. If the court upholds the impeachment, as it did with President Park Geun-hye in 2017, Yoon would be ousted from office and elections must be held within 60 days. If the court overturns the impeachment, as it did with President Roh Moo-hyun in 2004, Yoon would be reinstated and the next presidential election would be slated for its regularly scheduled date in March 2027. (By law, South Korean presidents serve one five-year term.) Park's and Roh's verdicts were returned within 63 days and 92 days, respectively. Separately, Yoon is under [criminal investigation](#) for insurrection, a charge that supersedes the president's usual immunity from prosecution.

The timing of the court's verdict could be important because the presumed [front-runner](#) for an early election, DP leader [Lee Jae-myung](#), faces multiple court proceedings in which guilty verdicts could render him ineligible for political office. Lee, who lost the 2022 presidential election to Yoon by 0.7% of the vote, is [accused](#) of corruption, violating election laws, and involvement in an illegal cash transfer to North Korea. He is appealing a November 2024 election law [conviction](#) that bars him from running for office.

U.S. Government Response

As shown in **Table 1**, during the six hours martial law was in place and in the aftermath of its lifting, Biden Administration [officials](#) expressed "[concern](#)" at Yoon's martial law declaration. They also stated their [expectation](#) that political disputes would be resolved peacefully and lawfully, sentiments some Members of Congress [echoed](#). Some Members [criticized](#) Yoon's martial law declaration directly. Following Yoon's impeachment, President Joe Biden [spoke](#) with then-Acting President Han to express "his appreciation for the resiliency of democracy and the rule of law" in South Korea.

Geostrategic Implications

Since assuming office in 2022, Yoon has brought South Korea into [closer alignment](#) with the United States on North Korea, China, Japan, and Ukraine. The DP, whose approval rating now tops the PPP's by [double-digits](#) in some polls, tends to advocate [starkly different policies](#). The Assembly's [first impeachment motion](#), for instance, accused Yoon of "neglect[ing]" geopolitical balance by "antagonizing" North Korea, China, and Russia and by pursuing a "strange Japan-centered" foreign policy. DP Leader Lee reportedly said including those items had been a [mistake](#), and they were not included in the second impeachment motion.

A question facing U.S. policymakers and Congress is whether Yoon's deployment of the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea) military to implement martial law, without notifying U.S. military commanders in Korea, poses [concerns about the state of alliance coordination](#). Additionally, the fallout from Yoon's moves may have compromised the PPP government's ability to engage in major foreign policy initiatives. Under an interim president, Seoul may be at a [disadvantage in advocating for its positions](#) if the next U.S. Administration pursues changes affecting U.S.-ROK relations, including on tariffs, the size of U.S. troop deployments to South Korea, policy toward semiconductors and other

technology sectors, and/or modifying or withdrawing from the [U.S.-ROK burden-sharing agreement](#) that was finalized in November 2024.

Similarly, Yoon's suspension and possible removal from office raise questions about the continuation of several foreign policies he has pursued, including

- A relative hardline policy toward North Korea that treats North Korea as an existential threat and emphasizes deterrence. In contrast, South Korean progressives tend to emphasize engagement policies.
- [Integrating](#) South Korea into the U.S.-led network of alliances and partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, with a goal of making South Korea a “[global pivotal state](#),” including by championing democratic values. Many South Korean [progressives have criticized Yoon's policy](#).
- A greater willingness than prior ROK leaders to publicly criticize China's actions. DP Leader Lee has [questioned](#) this approach.
- Improving relations with Japan and expanding ROK-U.S.-Japan relations, which have been [centerpieces](#) of Yoon's foreign policy, an approach involving compromises on historical issues with Japan that Lee has [characterized](#) as “shameful.”

Table I. Timeline of Events

	DATE	EVENT
2022	March	• Yoon Suk Yeol defeats Lee Jae-myung in presidential election by less than 1.0% of the popular vote.
2024	April	• In National Assembly elections, the Democratic Party (DP) and other opposition parties increase their parliamentary majority.
	Sept.	• Opposition lawmakers question Defense Minister nominee about rumors he might declare martial law.
	Nov. 15	• Lee Jae-myung, now DP leader, convicted of election law violations, a ruling that if upheld will disqualify him from running for political office.
	Nov. 27	• Yoon issues third veto of bill calling for special prosecutorial investigation into First Lady's scandals.
	Nov. 29	• In committee, DP cuts nearly \$3 billion from Yoon's FY2025 budget proposal, including from offices investigating DP leader Lee.
	Dec. 2	• DP introduces impeachment motions against top prosecutors and the chief state auditor, citing their mishandling of cases regarding First Lady.
	Dec. 3-4	Marshall Law Declared • At 10:25pm, Yoon accuses the DP of an “attack on the constitutional order,” and declares martial law to “eradicate pro-DPRK, anti-state forces.” • Military troops converge on National Assembly and other locations. • National Assembly members break through or skirt security cordon and vote 190-0 demanding Yoon lift martial law. • U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell says the Biden Administration is watching events in South Korea “with grave concern,” and has “every hope and expectation that any political disputes will be resolved peacefully and in accordance with the rule of law.”

- U.S. Defense Department postpones scheduled U.S.- Republic of Korea (ROK) Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) meeting and table-top exercise, and says there “have been no changes” to U.S. force posture in South Korea.
 - At 4:30am, Yoon complies with National Assembly martial law vote.
 - Secretary of State Antony Blinken “welcome[s]” the lifting of martial law and says, “we continue to expect political disagreements to be resolved peacefully and in accordance with the rule of law.”
- Dec. 5**
- U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan says “we were not consulted in any way” on Yoon’s declaration of martial law, which “raised deep concern for us.”
 - Deputy Secretary of State Campbell says Yoon “badly misjudged” in declaring martial law.
- Dec. 6**
- U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin reportedly cancels a trip to South Korea.
 - In phone conversation with ROK Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul, Blinken expresses “deep concerns” about the martial law declaration and welcomes its lifting. Cho meets with U.S. Ambassador to South Korea Philip Goldberg.
- Dec. 7**
- Yoon apologizes for martial law, says his People Power Party (PPP) to decide length of term and how the government should be run.
 - In National Assembly, first impeachment vote against Yoon narrowly fails after almost all PPP representatives boycott proceedings.
- Dec. 8**
- PPP chairman, Han Dong-hoon, says Yoon is no longer running the government, eventually will step down, and that Yoon’s Prime Minister Han Duk-soo and the PPP are in charge of state affairs.
 - DP rejects PPP Leader Han’s plan as extra-constitutional.
- Dec. 9**
- Former Defense Minister, who resigned on Dec. 4, arrested. He later attempts suicide.
 - Justice Ministry bars Yoon from leaving South Korea, lists him as criminal suspect on insurrection charges.
- Dec. 12**
- Addressing the public, Yoon says he declared martial law “to protect and restore” constitutional order, which the DP is “destroying” through its “autocratic and violent control of legislation.” He accuses the DP of “sympathiz[ing]” with North Korea and says he “will fight to the end.”
- Dec. 14**
- Second impeachment motion passes with 204 votes, stripping Yoon of his powers. Prime Minister Han Duk-soo becomes Acting President.
- Dec. 15**
- President Biden speaks with Acting President Han.
- Dec. 19**
- Acting President Han vetoes six bills passed by National Assembly.
- Dec. 24**
- Acting President Han declines to promulgate bills passed by the National Assembly authorizing the establishment of special counsels to probe President Yoon and First Lady.
- Dec. 27**
- Acting President Han declines to sign off on the National Assembly’s nominees to fill three vacancies on the Constitutional Court’s nine-member bench, saying the ruling and opposition parties first must agree on whether the acting president has authority to do, and on who should be appointed as justices. The ruling PPP had boycotted the nomination vote, arguing that only an elected president has the authority to sign off on judges.
 - National Assembly impeaches Han 192-0, with PPP boycotting the vote. Finance minister and Deputy Prime Minister Choi Sang-mok becomes Acting President. Before the vote, National Assembly Speaker rules that the impeachment motion requires a simple majority to pass, because only an elected president requires a two-thirds majority to be impeached.
- Dec 31**
- Acting President Choi signs off on two of the National Assembly’s three nominees to the Constitutional Court. One was proposed by the DP, the other by the PPP.
 - Arrest warrant issued for Yoon on rebellion and abuse of power charges. Yoon, who has refused three summonses for questioning, rejects the warrant’s legitimacy.

Source: Various, including timelines published by [KoreaPro](#) and the [Korea Economic Institute](#).

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