

With Martial Law Defeated, Now Is A Decisive Moment For Change In South Korea



12-12-2024 ~ Late at night on December 3, soldiers stormed into South Korea's National Assembly in armored vehicles and combat helicopters. Assembly staff desperately [blocked](#) their assault with fire extinguishers and barricades. South Korea's President Yoon Suk Yeol had just declared martial law to "[eliminate 'anti-state' forces.](#)"

Outside the National Assembly, people gathered from all over Seoul and beyond. Within the hour, thousands were violating the martial law's ban on all political activities and protests. People shivered in the cold as they [stood off](#) against the army and police, armed with nothing but songs and chants. They needed to defend the National Assembly until the vote to revoke martial law. Their [chants](#) grew louder: "Abolish martial law!" "Down with the dictatorship!"

Yoon conceded to the National Assembly vote and people's resistance on the morning of December 4. His short-lived [self-coup](#) plunged South Korea into a furor. South Koreans managed to stop the rise of another dictatorship. Now, they need to organize into a force that can impeach him and carry out the structural changes required to ensure a complete democratic transformation in South Korea.

South Korea has a long history of using martial law to establish authoritarian rule. Yoon's attempt was the [17th martial law](#) in the 76 years since the founding of the Republic of Korea. The last time martial law was declared was 45 years ago, following Chun Doo-hwan's coup that established Korea's third dictatorship. The 1979 martial law was met with people's resistance in the city of Gwangju, which the military regime massacred. South Korea also narrowly escaped martial law in 2017, when the Defense Security Command [planned](#) to seize control of Seoul with tanks and special forces for President Park Geun-hye, but she was impeached before the planned self-coup could be executed.

Impeachment is on the horizon again. Shocked and enraged by the attempted coup, about a million people [rushed](#) to the streets, demanding Yoon be ousted and arrested. However, there are two hurdles on the road to impeachment. First, two-thirds of the National Assembly must [vote](#) in favor of the motion. The combined strength of the opposition parties is just eight members short of two-thirds, which means there must be dissenting members from the ruling People Power Party for the impeachment motion to pass. On December 7, the motion [failed](#) to pass as all but three members of the ruling party boycotted the vote. However, the opposition parties intend to introduce the impeachment motion [every week](#) until it passes.

Second, once the National Assembly passes the motion, the decision of whether or not to impeach is up to the Constitutional Court. If at least six out of the nine justices are in favor of the decision, the president will be impeached. But, with only six justices on the bench, it is one short of its quorum of seven. However, Article 23, Paragraph 1 of the Constitutional Court Act, which specifies the quorum, was temporarily [suspended](#) in October. Thus, if the six justices are unanimous in their decision, Yoon could be impeached. Nonetheless, this possibility remains within legal gray areas.

What would happen after the impeachment? After the 2016 candlelight protests led to the impeachment of the corrupt Park Geun-hye regime, Moon Jae-in of the Democratic Party took power, [promising](#) to “Complete the Candlelight Revolution” by reforming the authoritarian government institutions, vestiges of dictatorship, and corrupt corporate conglomerates. Trusting his promise, mass mobilization efforts stopped. The power that overthrew the Park regime stepped down from the stage, hoping for top-down changes.

With more than 80 percent [support ratings](#), the highest of any president, Moon was well-empowered to reform South Korean society toward greater equality and democracy. However, he did not take long to [backtrack](#) on many of his policies, and the promised social, economic, and constitutional reforms were never implemented. The Moon administration had started with boundless possibilities for social change, but in the end, it failed to fulfill its historic responsibility, instead contenting itself with maintaining the neoliberal status quo. The people’s disappointment and the subsequent political apathy led to the election of Yoon Suk Yeol, whose inept and authoritarian rule culminated in this martial law fiasco.

Now, history is about to repeat itself. At this moment, popular mobilization is necessary more than ever. The [danger](#) of a second martial law still looms. The people need to make a show of force so that the president does not attempt another coup. His power is already crumbling, with dissenting [voices](#) even within the military, but the threat will continue to haunt Korean democracy until he is entirely removed from office. Institutional hurdles and legal uncertainties are still present on the path to impeachment. The people need to apply constant pressure so that the impeachment motion pushes through the National Assembly and the Constitutional Court.

The 2016 candlelight uprising shows that a change in administration does not bring meaningful social change by itself, no matter how promising it may seem. It is necessary for the struggle to not stop at mobilization. At this point, the mobilization for impeachment is simply a defensive action to prevent further harm. The people need to seize the initiative and impose an alternative social order with their power to take one step further and change society for the better. To build this power, the people need to be organized into a concrete political force that can confidently propose a clear vision of a new society. Such a force would then need to hold the new administration accountable to the people's demands and push toward the formation of that new society.

On December 4, 50 representatives of civil society organizations came together in an emergency [meeting](#) to debate the path forward. They agreed to create a coalition based on three goals: oust Yoon, hold the ruling party accountable, and achieve popular sovereignty and society-wide reforms. These goals are just a starting point. Now, the progressive forces in South Korea need to unite around the people's struggle and listen to their demands closely. Analyses and debates then need to transform those demands into an actionable program of social change. It is the duty of the progressive forces now to present the people with the broadest unity and the sharpest vision to help them build and organize their power.

The situation continues to unfold in South Korea. Each passing moment shakes the foundation of the current social order and further opens the horizon of possibility. The people experienced a taste of their power in their defense to uphold democracy. It is now up to them to decide whether this movement will end here or will lead to the creation of a new, transformative power that will finally complete the democratization of South Korea. Now more than ever, the solidarity

of the progressive forces all around the world is necessary to spur the Korean people onward to seize this moment and forge their own destiny.

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