

South Korea President Yoon Suk Yeol impeached over his martial law order

South Korea impeaches President Yoon Suk Yeol over martial law decree, sparking intense debate and political turmoil

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AP



South Korea's parliament has voted to impeach President Yoon Suk Yeol. File | Photo Credit: AFP

South Korea's parliament on Saturday (December 14, 2024) impeached President Yoon Suk Yeol over his stunning and short-lived martial law decree, a move that ended days of political paralysis but set up an intense debate over Mr. Yoon's fate, as jubilant crowds roared to celebrate another defiant moment in the country's resilient democracy.

The National Assembly passed the motion 204-85. Mr. Yoon's presidential powers and duties were subsequently suspended and Prime Minister Han Duck-soo, the country's No. 2 official, took over presidential powers later Saturday (December 14, 2024).

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The Constitutional Court has up to 180 days to determine whether to dismiss Mr. Yoon as President or restore his powers. If he's thrown out of office, a national election to choose his successor must be held within 60 days.

It was the second National Assembly vote on Mr. Yoon's impeachment after ruling party lawmakers boycotted the first floor vote last Saturday (December 14, 2024). Some People Power Party lawmakers had since said they would vote for Mr. Yoon's impeachment as public protests intensified and his approval rating plummeted.

National Assembly Speaker Woo Won Shik said Mr. Yoon's impeachment was an outcome driven by "the people's ardent desire for democracy, courage and dedication."

Hundreds of thousands of people gathered near the parliament roared in jubilation, waved banners and brandished colorful K-pop glow sticks, as a lead activist shouted on stage, "We have preserved the constitutional order!"

In a central Seoul plaza, another huge crowd gathered supporting Mr. Yoon, but they grew subdued after hearing he had been impeached. Both rallies have largely been peaceful.

Mr. Yoon issued a statement saying he would "never give up" and calling for officials to maintain stability in government functions during what he described as a "temporary" pause of his presidency.

"I will carry with me all the criticisms, encouragement and support directed toward me, and I will continue to do my utmost for the country until the very last moment," Mr. Yoon said.

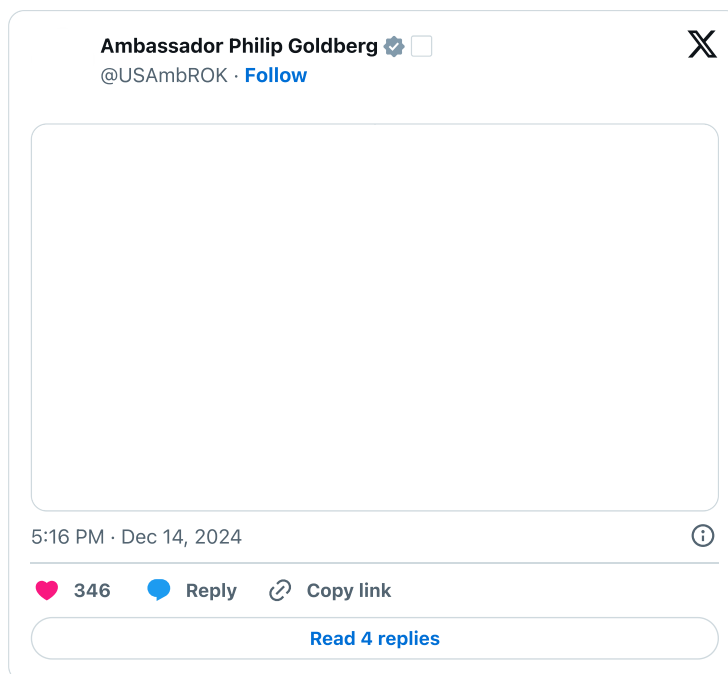
Mr. Yoon's December 3 imposition of martial law, the first of its kind in more than four decades in South Korea, lasted only six hours, but has caused massive political tumult, halted diplomatic activities and rattled financial markets. Yoon was forced to lift his decree after parliament unanimously voted to overturn it.

Han, the acting leader, ordered the military to bolster its security posture to prevent North Korea from launching provocations by miscalculation. Mr. Han asked the Foreign Minister to inform other countries that South Korea's major external policies remain unchanged, and the finance minister to work to minimize potential negative impacts on the economy by the political turmoil, according to Mr. Han's office.

"I earnestly ask public servants this. At this moment, we have the critical task of ensuring normal and stable operations of state affairs ... I ask you to carry out your duties without any neglect to ensure that the government is operated without being shaken," Mr. Han said in a televised statement.

South Korea's executive power is concentrated with the President, but the Prime Minister leads the country if the President becomes incapacitated. Mr. Han is a seasoned official and has previously held a string of top government posts such as trade minister and finance minister and was the ambassador to the U.S. He also served as a prime minister from 2007-2008.

Philip S. Goldberg, the U.S. ambassador in South Korea, wrote on X that he just met South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul and they reaffirmed the two countries' alliance will remain "ironclad." Goldberg said the U.S. supports South Korea's "democratic and constitutional process here and stands with its people."



After declaring martial law, Mr. Yoon sent hundreds of troops and police officers to the parliament to try to impede its vote on the decree, before they withdrew after the parliament rejected Yoon's decree. No major violence occurred.

Opposition parties and many experts accuse Mr. Yoon of rebellion, citing a law that categorizes as rebellion the staging of a riot against established state authorities to undermine the constitution. They also say that a President in South Korea is allowed to declare martial law only during wartime or similar emergencies and has no right to suspend parliament's operations even under martial law.

The impeachment motion alleged that Mr. Yoon "committed rebellion that hurt peace in the Republic of Korea by staging a series of riots." It said Mr. Yoon's mobilization of military and police forces threatened the National Assembly and the public and that his martial law decree was aimed at disturbing the constitution.

In a fiery speech on Thursday (December 12, 2024), Mr. Yoon rejected the rebellion charges, calling his martial law introduction an act of governance. The conservative Mr. Yoon said he aimed to issue a warning to the main liberal opposition Democratic Party, calling it "a monster" and "anti-state forces" that he argued has flexed its legislative muscle to impeach top officials and undermine the government's budget bill for next year. He claimed the deployment of troops was meant to maintain order, rather than disrupt it.

Democratic Party leader Lee Jae-myung called Mr. Yoon's speech a "mad declaration of war" against his own people.

Observers say Mr. Yoon's speech suggested a focus on legal preparations to defend his martial law decree at the Constitutional Court, even as opinion surveys showed more than 70% of South Koreans supported his impeachment. A survey released Friday (December 13, 2024) put Mr. Yoon's approval rating at 11%, the lowest since he took office in 2022.

Some of Mr. Yoon's claims don't align with testimony by some military commanders whose troops were deployed to the Assembly.

Most notably, Kwak Jong-keun, commander of the Army Special Warfare Command, said that after martial law was announced, Mr. Yoon called him and asked for his troops to "quickly destroy the door and drag out the lawmakers who are inside." Kwak said he didn't carry out Mr. Yoon's orders.

Mr. Yoon is the third South Korean President impeached while in office. In 2016, parliament impeached Park Geun-hye, the country's first female President, over a corruption scandal. The Constitutional Court upheld her impeachment and dismissed her from office.

In 2004, President Roh Moo-hyun was impeached at parliament over an alleged election law violation but the court later overturned his impeachment and restored his presidential powers. Roh jumped to his death in 2009, after he had left office, amid a corruption scandal involving his family.

Mr. Yoon has been banned from leaving South Korea.

He has the presidential privilege of immunity from criminal prosecution but that doesn't extend to allegations of rebellion or treason. Subsequently, Mr. Yoon could be investigated, detained, arrested or indicted over his martial law decree, but many observers doubt that authorities will forcefully detain him because of the potential for clashes with his presidential security service.

Mr. Yoon's Defense Minister, police chief and the head of Seoul's metropolitan police agency have been arrested. Other senior military and government officials also face investigations.

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