

South Korea Dodges Coup Attempt

By Don Sutherland

On December 3, deeply unpopular South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol declared martial law. The military's Defense Counterintelligence Command was ordered to detain leading political leaders, including the Speaker of the National Assembly and the head of Yoon's own party. Before any detentions could occur, Parliament voted 190-0 to reject the declaration of martial law. Large demonstrations erupted in the streets of Seoul. Some six hours later, the President lifted his declaration of martial law. Yoon's attempt to seize power had failed.

The outcome differed starkly from the last time a South Korean leader declared martial law in 1980. Then, a harsh crackdown, including a massacre of student demonstrators at Gwangju, and extended period of authoritarian rule followed.

The rapid rejection of martial law on the part of Parliament and the general public created the necessary pressure to break the President's attempt to topple South Korea's democracy. Speed is of the essence. Delay creates opportunities for would-be authoritarians to consolidate power. In general, if martial law or coup attempts fail, one sees a combination of rapid developments including:

- Governing institutions reject the outcome demonstrating that it is illegitimate
- Massive popular protests break out in opposition to the outcome
- An open-ended national strike is launched to cripple a nation's economy and heap pressure on the would-be authoritarian leader
- The news media defies attempts at censorship
- Military elements refuse to follow orders or defect outright
- International allies reject the outcome

The first two elements were present. Parliament swiftly and unanimously rejected martial law. Large protests in opposition to martial law erupted immediately following the declaration. Yoon had insufficient time to curb the news media.

Impositions of martial law or coup attempts often succeed when there is hesitation or delay. Within a year or two, power is fully consolidated, and democratic institutions are stripped of their capacity to oppose the outcome. Some developments for successful coup attempts include:

- The coup leader moves to suppress demonstrations
- The coup leader suppresses news coverage
- The coup leader arrests opposition leaders, key leaders of democratic institutions, and key members of civil society
- The coup leader puts loyalists in charge of key institutions, particularly military, security, and police institutions
- The coup leader seeks accommodation with international allies

The early evidence indicates that Yoon had ordered the detention of key political leaders. Had he succeeded in decapitating Parliament from the detentions and thwarted Parliament's ability to reject martial law, the outcome could have ended very badly for South Korea's democracy. If South Korea is to secure its democracy and democratic institutions from further threats, swift and decisive action to hold President Yoon and those who assisted him accountable will be required. So far, developments in South Korea appear more promising than they were in the United States following President Trump's January 6, 2021 self-coup attempt.

In the United States, just hours after the Trump insurrection ended, 139 members of the House of Representatives and 8 members of the Senate conferred legitimacy on the insurrectionists by voting against certifying Trump's 2020 election defeat. The Senate failed to vote to convict Trump for his actions, with 43 Republican Senators backing Trump. Afterward, an increasingly enfeebled U.S. justice system proved unable to prosecute Trump. Even in New York State where Trump was convicted on 34 counts of business fraud, the presiding Judge lacked the courage to sentence Trump in accordance with the jury's verdict. The U.S. Supreme Court, one-third of which was appointed by Trump, issued a Presidential immunity ruling that put the President above the law, even as the Framers explicitly made clear that the President was not to be outside the law. Trump went on to win the 2024 election and will return to the White House on January 20th. And if history is a guide, his second Administration will very likely inflict significant additional damage on the United States' democratic institutions.