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**PRESIDENT YOON'S SHORT-LIVED  
MARTIAL LAW DECLARATION AND ITS  
FALLOUT**

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## Abstract

*President Yoon Suk-Yeol sent the Republic of Korea into political turmoil in early December 2024 by declaring martial law, citing the need to “wipe out anti-state forces,” only to withdraw it again several hours later. Since then, the country has been sent into uncertainty. While impeachment proceedings have been set in motion, these recent developments have severely impacted the country’s domestic governance, as well as its ability to participate in global politics. What are likely avenues for South Korea to overcome this political unrest and what does it mean for EU-South Korea relations?*

**Keywords:** *South Korea, Martial Law, Impeachment, President Yoon Suk-Yeol*

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# President Yoon's Short-lived Martial Law Declaration and Its Fallout

## 1. What Happened?

At 10:28 pm on Tuesday 3 December 2024, in a surprise urgent public address, President Yoon Suk-Yeol declared the imposition of martial law. "I will wipe out anti-state forces as soon as possible and normalize the country's operation," Yoon stated in the televised briefing, adding that ["through martial law, I will defend and rebuild the Republic of Korea's freedom that is suffering a downward spiral."](#)

His move prohibited "all political activities, including the activities of the National Assembly, local councils, political parties, and political associations, as well as assemblies and demonstrations", while ["placing all media and publications under the control of the Martial Law Command."](#) The martial law decree also [ordered the striking doctors to go back to work.](#)

Catching the country by surprise, chaos quickly erupted as military troops tried to seize control of the National Assembly building as [parliamentary aides sprayed fire extinguishers to push them back while protesters scuffled with police outside.](#) But parliament moved swiftly. [Under Article 77 of the South Korean constitution, the National Assembly can request martial law to be lifted with a majority vote of its total number of members.](#) Ultimately, 190 out of 300 lawmakers were able to reach the main hall and voted at around 1 am on Wednesday, 4 December 2024, to [unanimously demand the president to lift martial law.](#) By 4:20am, President Yoon announced his decision to comply and [martial law was lifted](#) again.

While most politicians have stated that the declaration of martial law was "unconstitutional and illegal," a few conservative politicians in Yoon's party, the People's Power Party (PPP), expressed their support – notably former Prime Minister Hwang Kyo-ahn and Busan city councilman Park Jong-cheol. Park wrote at 11:16pm on 3 December 2024 that he ["actively supports and sympathizes with the declaration of martial law"](#) and echoed Hwang's statements that pro-North "spies" were to be weeded out. A day later, on Wednesday, 4 December 2024, Realmeter surveyed 504 people aged 18 or older and found that [73.6 percent of respondents supported Yoon's impeachment, while 24 percent opposed it.](#) Combined, this paints a picture that – while most of the public disapproved of the declaration of martial law – South Korea was facing a split society with a significant minority supporting the claims of 'spies' and election fraud.

Martial law has a troubled history in South Korea, and a long standing history of abuses of military law have left a [deep imprint on the South Korean society](#). [Democracy in South Korea is said to have taken a step backwards since Yoon took office](#). Press freedom in the country had dropped from [47th to 62nd, according to Reporters Without Borders](#). Yet, because of the swift actions of parliamentarians and civilians alike, South Korea was able to dodge a bullet. Nevertheless, ever since they have entered a period of great political uncertainty.

## 2. Why Did President Yoon Decide to Declare Martial Law?

[A ministry official confirmed](#) that it was Kim Yong-hyun, the now former Defence Minister, who asked President Yoon to issue the martial law order. Somewhat ironically, this comes after [Kim denied that his appointment was part of preparations to declare martial law](#) during his confirmation hearing back in September 2024. An [alumnus of Choongam High School](#) (from which Yoon also graduated), he was this administration's third defense minister and allegedly plotted military rule under martial law since his appointment. However, it will take months and a series of investigations to determine whether or not these allegations are correct or not.

What is certain is that Yoon's Presidency had been facing growing challenges and struggles. In addition to being identified as a lame duck president he had already been facing calls for his impeachment prior to declaring martial law. Yoon has been embroiled in an [influence-peddling scandal](#) involving his wife and himself – in which he was also critiqued for his [uncooperative attitude toward the hearings](#). Domestically, Yoon had only won the presidency in March 2022 by [less than one percentage point](#). He had taken a hard stance against [labour unions and striking doctors](#), and his [cuts to research and development programmes](#) is said to have triggered Korea's current healthcare crisis. In early December 2024, Yoon's approval rating was at around 20 percent – [down from 53 percent](#) when he first assumed office. Yoon had been reduced to vetoing bills passed by the opposition – a tactic he allegedly used with "[unprecedented frequency](#)." Notably, the week of the martial law declaration, [the opposition slashed the budget that the government and ruling party had put forward](#) – a budget bill cannot be vetoed.

For some observers, President Yoon's "rigid" confidence, self-assurance, and powers of the presidency [had morphed into paranoia](#), leading to the development of even more extreme views. As a former deputy chief prosecutor said, "It appears his overconfidence and inability to manage anger have led him to view power as his own property."

Given his personality and Yoon being a relatively inexperienced leader, it is not out of the question that he grew frustrated at the lack of progress and inability to pass any of his proposed bills through parliament. Combined with North Korea's strengthened ties to Russia and sending troops to assist their war effort in Ukraine, Yoon used the momentum to try to play up anxieties and fears around North Korea to justify his extreme action. Put together, President Yoon's move could have been an ill-advised method of overruling parliament to get his bills and laws through and avoid the opposition Democratic Party's budget bill from coming through, thereby averting investigations against him personally to be followed through.

### 2.1 Chasing Claims of Election Fraud

While the public was focused on the National Assembly after Yoon's surprise declaration of Martial Law, [297 military personnel were dispatched](#) to three different National Electoral Commission (NEC) buildings (Gwacheon; Suwon, Gyeonggi Province; and Gwanak-gu, Seoul). These [troops arrived at the headquarters only six minutes after the martial law decree was announced](#), much quicker than the deployment to the Assembly. Yeo In-hyung, the military's counterintelligence commander, [reportedly confirmed that the NEC was a main target of the military mission during martial law](#), alongside the Assembly.

In the meantime, reports have emerged suggesting that the deployment had been tied to [a conspiracy theory that the 10th of April 2024 general election had been rigged](#), and that this may have been an attempt to claim election fraud. Former Defence Minister Kim stated that troops had been sent to the NEC out of "[the necessity of an investigation into alleged election fraud](#)" as "many citizens had raised suspicions of election fraud." Election fraud claims have been declared by South Korean agencies as [unfounded](#), but have spread through online platforms like Youtube. Rep. Lee Jun-seok, former PPP member, [said one of the first subjects the president brought up during their first in-person meeting was election fraud](#) and has accused Yoon of "being crazy" about conspiracy theories. The current evidence regarding conspiracy theories around election fraud indicate to have influenced the martial law declaration. If not as a main driver of it, it was likely something leadership took advantage of.

## 3. The Order of Events After the Declaration of Martial Law

A whirlwind of events has taken place since Tuesday, 3 December 2024 as investigations, legal cases, and political procedures kicked off. While many of these motions are still ongoing, we can start to piece together a better understanding of what has happened since the events took place and what the future holds for South Korea.

### 3.1 Failed Impeachment Vote

The day after the declaration of martial law, on Wednesday, 4 December 2024, the main opposition Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) jointly submitted a bill co-authored by five other opposition parties (Rebuilding Korea Party (RKP), New Reform Party, Progressive Party, Basic Income Party and Social Democratic Party) [to impeach President Yoon](#). The bill was put to the vote on Saturday, the 7th of December 2024, but [failed as members of the PPP boycotted the vote](#) with a walkout.

An impeachment motion requires the approval of at least two-thirds of those present to pass – [should all Assembly members attend, it would need more than 200 out of 300 votes](#). Yoon's party [controls 108 seats](#), requiring at least 8 members of his party to vote in favour of impeachment. While the majority of the PPP had shown themselves to be willing to prevent a Yoon impeachment in spite of public pressure, cracks soon began to appear within the party.

Most notably, PPP chief Han Dong-hoon flip-flopped rather publically. Initially, he [had declared that he would block the impeachment motion “in order to prevent damage to the people and supporters \(of the ruling bloc\) that would arise from unexpected chaos.”](#) When it later came out that President Yoon had allegedly [ordered the arrest of prominent lawmakers of the ruling and main opposition parties](#) – including Han Dong-hoon himself – [he came out in support of the impeachment motion](#), citing fears that President Yoon would attempt to declare martial law again. Yet, after the boycott, Han Dong-hoon came out and said that the party and president Yoon Suk-Yeol would work together for an “[orderly path](#)” for Yoon to leave office. He flipped opinions one final time on the 12th of December after Yoon's 20 minute rebuttal, stating that the address “[highlighted the president's inability to continue his presidency](#)” and urged PPP lawmakers to vote in favour of the impeachment motion on the 14th of December.

Overall, however, the PPP's resistance to public pressure and Yoon's ever-falling approval rating is noteworthy, albeit unsurprising. It could be that the PPP still feels 'burnt,' per say, for the impeachment of Park Geun-hye who belonged to the PPP's predecessor party, and did not wish to repeat the saga.

### 3.2 Former Defence Minister Kim Yong-hyun Turned Scapegoat

On Tuesday, the 10th of December 2024, Former Defence Minister Kim forewent a court appearance on a formal detention warrant, issuing a statement through his lawyer disclosing that all responsibilities for the martial law crisis [lay solely with him](#). That night, the Seoul Central District Court [approved his arrest warrant](#), making Kim the first key figure arrested

in relation to the 3rd of December's martial law decree. Kim now faces allegations of spearheading the actions during the state of emergency, such as proposing the declaration of martial law to the President, ordering the military intervention at the National Assembly and Election Commission, drafting a preliminary martial law proclamation, and ordering the arrest of political leaders.

While it is undeniable that Kim played an important role, the prosecution's focus on Kim over Yoon raised questions. Kwak Jong-geun, the commander of the Army Special Warfare Command, told a parliament committee that Seoul prosecutors [were framing their questions in a way that held Kim rather than the president accountable](#), putting the president second. Rep. Cho Kuk, who had been questioning Kwak, then suggested that the former defense minister was covering up for the president, pointing out that "[Kim Yong-hyun told the media that he stated during a questioning by prosecutors that he was delegated the authority to give orders by the president that night](#)." Kim offered his resignation on the 4th of December, the same day martial law was revoked, and he himself had [turned himself in for questioning on the 8th of December](#), after initially refusing to respond to prosecution summons – combined with Kim's long-standing relationship with Yoon, it did not help the rumors of Kim being a scapegoat.

Prosecutors, on the other hand, have stressed that Kim's role was "[pivotal but secondary to Yoon](#)." Kim has reportedly been classified as someone who undertook "significant" tasks but stopped short of being the "ringleader." Instead, prosecutors said they were using Kim to be able to expand their investigations to Yoon and other senior officials.

Altogether it was unlikely that President Yoon would survive this ordeal without any legal repercussions. However, considering his years working as a prosecutor, it cannot be ignored that there may be pro-Yoon supporters within the Prosecution office willing to try to shift the blame or focus to other members of the government. The [Prosecution office has a poor track record](#) – as they had cleared first lady Kim Keon-Hee in a luxury handbag scandal, and politicians have accused them of leveraging the investigation for political maneuvering. Yet, Yoon seems to be determined to fight this to the end, so it will be important for Korean citizens and international watchers to keep an eye on how the investigations progress.

### 3.3 President Yoon doubling down

President Yoon was unlikely to resign – [his lifting of martial law was hardly apologetic](#) to begin with. On the 12th of December 2024, at around 9:40 am, Yoon televised a 29-minute address where he pledged to [withstand his ordeals until the end, demonstrating his will to](#)



[respond legally to impeachment proceedings and investigations](#). His statement reversed his December 7th promise to delegate his power to the ruling party and government, and dismissed the PPP's "orderly retreat" tactic.

Instead, in his address, the president said that the declaration of martial law was based on "[a highly political judgment by the president](#)" to protect the nation and normalize the government and thus a sovereign act not subject to judicial review. He argued that viewing his usage of martial law as an act of insurrection would be a threat to the Korean Constitution and legal system.

His actions could have been intended to rile up his supporters and far-right base, especially as he has been facing mounting legal challenges. For now what it has definitely managed to achieve is to highlight South Korea's political instability in the eyes of foreign powers.

### 3.4 The National Assembly Vote to Impeach President Yoon

On Saturday, the 14th of December 2024, the National Assembly brought to a vote a second time impeachment motions against President Yoon. This time, however, [the motion passed with 204 lawmakers voting in favour](#) – 12 PPP members threw their support behind the impeachment. According to South Korean TV, 85 MPs voted against, three ballots were spoiled, and eight were ruled invalid.

With this, Yoon's authority was immediately suspended and his case moved to the Constitutional Court for an impeachment trial. In the meantime, Prime Minister Han Duck-soo had assumed the role of acting president. [He ought to remain acting leader until a new presidential election was to be held within 60 days of the Court confirming the impeachment or Yoon's resignation](#). Yet, Han Duck-soo would soon find himself impeached as well.

On Monday the 16th of December 2024, [PPP leader Han Dong-hoon announced his resignation](#). The move was unsurprising, given that the majority of his party had ignored his calls to back Yoon's impeachment. [All five elected members of the ruling party's supreme council expressed their intent to resign](#) after Yoon's impeachment, making it "impossible" for Han Dong-hoon to carry out his duties. Han Dong-hoon also expressed that he does not regret backing impeachment, only apologizing for his "inability" to find a better solution for the country.

### 3.5 The Impeachment Case and the Battle over the Justices

The [Constitutional Court has six months to confirm the impeachment by a vote of six out of nine justices](#). At the start of this saga, the Court currently only had six sitting justices – [who would have to vote unanimously in favour to uphold the parliament’s decision](#). While there was previously doubt over whether or not the court would hear the case without nine sitting justices, they have confirmed Yoon's trial and heard its [first hearing on Friday 27 December 2024](#). Yet, the fact that the courts would have to unanimously agree on Yoon’s fate has caused opposition party members to push the government to fill the vacancies.

Han Duck-soo, as the acting president, [refused to immediately appoint three justices](#) to fill the vacancies at the constitutional court, claiming it would “exceed” his powers as an acting president. Rather, he would only certify the judges’ appointments if the PPP and DPK [reached a compromise on the nominees](#). For the opposition, this was proof that Han Duck-soo did not have the [“will or qualification to uphold the constitution.”](#)

The impeachment motion accused Han of [violating his duty as acting president](#) by refusing to appoint judges and to promulgate two special investigation bills on the martial law and graft allegations involving First Lady Kim Keon-Hee. On 27 December 2024, the National Assembly approved an [impeachment motion against Han Duck-soo by a 192-0 vote](#) (PPP members boycotting the vote). This means that now the finance minister, Choi Sang-mok, has become the interim president.

On his first regular Cabinet meeting after assuming the role, now Acting President Choi Sang-mok [only appointed two out of three Constitutional Court justice nominees](#) – one nominated by the DPK and one recommended by the PPP, but said he would hold off on the appointment of Ma Eun-hyuk, a DPK nominee, until the rival parties reached a compromise. The National Assembly had already voted in favour of the appointment of the three Constitutional Court justices. Choi also vetoed special counsel bills to investigate insurrection charges against President Yoon Suk-Yeol and the multiple allegations against first lady Kim Keon-Hee. Choi has also come under fire for [not assisting anti-corruption official’s attempts to arrest President Yoon](#). Put together, it raises the question of how long acting President Choi Sang-mok will remain in that role as the PPP seems determined to protect Yoon.

It is not guaranteed that the courts will approve the impeachment motion – in 2004, then president Roh Moo-hyun was impeached on charges of failing to maintain political neutrality, but [the court rejected the motion](#) after two months of deliberation. Roh would go

on to complete his term in office. Should the courts agree, Yoon would go on to become the second South Korean president to be successfully impeached – ironically following Park Geun-hye who was forced out in 2017 when Yoon was prosecutor general.

#### 4. Next Steps?

##### 4.1 Yoon Under Siege

Yoon himself remains defiant. After his impeachment, [Yoon stressed that he would fight until the end](#). He ignored summons to meet prosecutors in Seoul on the 15th of December. [Yoon then also failed to appear before investigators from the Corruption Investigation Office \(CIO\)](#). The presidential office's security service said that it would [not comply with attempted raids by investigative agencies](#). On the 19th of December 2024, the Constitutional Court said that the trial documents it tried to send to Yoon had not yet reached him. Rather, [the presidential security service repeatedly refused to receive the documents](#).

As Yoon has refused to cooperate with the investigation, an arrest warrant was issued. The initial warrant was approved by the courts on 31 December 2024, charging [Yoon with masterminding insurrection and abuse of power](#). Anti-corruption investigators tried to carry out the arrest on 3 January 2025, but called it off after a [six-hour standoff with the presidential security](#) at Yoon's residence. Now, the compound has had barbed wire installed and has been barricaded with buses in an effort to prevent law enforcement from entering the residence. Investigators asked the police to execute the warrant, but the police refused, saying it was “[legally controversial and its execution should be left to anti-corruption investigators](#).”

Yoon's lawyers and the presidential security service have justified their actions by claiming that the warrant for his arrest was “[illegal](#)” as the anti-corruption investigators did not have the authority to oversee a case as “serious” as an insurrection. Their injunction against the warrant, however, was rejected by the court. Acting president Choi Sang-mok has so far resisted opposition's calls to fire key security officials obstructing the arrest.

##### 4.2 New Elections and Impact on Foreign Relations

President Yoon had been embraced by Western leaders as [someone who would help the US-led effort to unify democracies against growing authoritarianism](#), talking up a foreign policy of shared democratic values. Under Yoon, Seoul had adopted a “[forward-leaning](#)

[posture](#),” repairing ties with Japan and strengthening the trilateral US-Japan-South Korea framework.

However, in only a number of hours the declaration of martial law has made South Korea appear politically unstable and entangled in domestic power struggles, which is expected to negatively impact the country’s international reputation. The martial law declaration [could complicate conversations about South Korea joining more multinational diplomatic efforts](#). President Yoon’s resistance against legal proceedings has been [ruffling the feathers of the Biden administration](#), who has urged South Korea to resolve differences peacefully as questions begin to arise over the robustness and effectiveness of the country’s institutions (where these were previously still praised).

For Europe, this comes at a particularly bad time – [Japan is seething its own uncertainties with the transition of power from Kishida to Ishiba](#) and Trump’s second presidency is looming ever closer. With North Korea fighting alongside Russia in its war with Ukraine, there had been hopes of South Korea becoming more involved in assisting Ukraine’s defence. While President Yoon had been open to considering a step-by-step approach to aiding Ukraine, [polls](#) suggest that 74.2% of South Koreans oppose providing lethal weapons to Ukraine. If leadership changes to a less hard one on North Korea or one less militarily inclined, Europe may find itself facing a harder battle.

While it is difficult to predict when new elections will take place, we can maintain some expectations for what the South Korean political landscape may develop towards. The PPP will likely find itself facing a landslide defeat. They already lagged behind during the April 2024 parliamentary election when [the opposition parties captured nearly two-thirds of the seats](#).

In April 2024, [the DPK won 175 out of the 300 seats](#) in the National Assembly, and although they are in disarray with its leader being convicted of election law violations and facing charges of corruption, it is not unreasonable to assume they may become the ruling party. [Rep. Lee Jae-myung was reelected as DPK chairman in August 2024 with 85.4% of the vote](#) and may be well-posed to become president once elections are called. As regards foreign affairs he voiced the desire to [strengthen cooperation with the EU and expand the ROK-EU strategic partnership](#) back in 2022, pushing for a foreign policy approach based on “pragmatism” and “national identity-related values.” He also stressed the need for further cooperation with NATO, continuing to forge partnerships across the globe.

However, in recent months he expressed disapproval of President Yoon considering sending a team of South Korean officials to Kyiv to monitor North Korean troops. He has also been opposed to offering lethal weapons to Ukraine, likening it to “[participating in the war itself.](#)” This comes after back in February 2022, Rep. Lee appeared to [blame Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy for Russia's invasion of the country.](#) While he later apologized for the “misunderstanding,” it brings into question how much aid Lee would be willing to offer once in office, especially in comparison to President Yoon.

### 4.3 The Role of Social Media

It had been an “open secret” that [Yoon was an avid watcher](#) of the colloquially called “[denture-tube](#)” (“teul-tube”) – a constellation of right-wing YouTube channels that enjoy an avid following among older conservative viewers. Yoon [had invited around 30 far-right Youtubers to his inauguration](#), including operators of channels such as Lee Bong-gyu TV and Sisa Warehouse. These same channels advocated the conspiracy theories of election fraud that motivated the raid of the National Electoral Committee buildings.

The Yoon administration was worryingly cozy with these conspiracy-peddling influencers. An appointee tapped to head civil servant training was revealed to [run a channel phishing claims about Chinese Communist infiltration of local politics](#) which were deleted after his appointment. Shin Ji-ho, deputy secretary-general for strategic planning of the PPP, alleged in a radio interview that “[first lady Kim called a pro-Yoon YouTuber and said, 'Han Dong-hoon \(then-PPP leader\) must be dealt with.'](#)” Furthermore, he claimed that Kim Min-jeon, a member of the PPP’s Supreme Council, exchanged messages with a conservative Youtuber who is pushing for disciplinary action against Han Dong-hoon.

The growth and impact of these youtube channels are undeniable – as of May 2024, the [five leading right-wing channels boasted over a million subscribers each](#), with another 14 having over 500,000 subscribers. Two right-wing political commentators ranked first and second in South Korea November Youtube “super chat” donations, earning 49,000 USD and 44,600 USD respectively. There is a strong social element to these youtube channels, and the subsequent [dissociation from mainstream media](#) by the community has created fertile ground for echo chambers and misinformation.

This phenomenon is not exclusive to South Korea, as we have seen it repeated across the globe. However, South Korea has become a case study as to what can happen when

conspiracy-centred communities and extreme thought gain influence within the government. It should serve as a warning for Europe, the US and other regions.

## 5. Resilient Institutions – For Now

It is still too early to be able to predict what the complete fallout of President Yoon’s martial law will be. The only certainty is that South Korea is likely entering a period of political instability and uncertainty in a time of shifting global dynamics where their active cooperation and support in international affairs would be highly welcomed. The events also continue to reveal the influence conspiracy theorists and far-right commentators on YouTube have on politics and politicians across the world.

South Korea, nevertheless, was able to avert a worst-case scenario through willpower and determination of civilians and legislators in the National Assembly. Their institutions have continued to hold up, despite the political and military turmoil. This shows strong proof of the strength of the democratic foundations on which the South Korean society and its institutions are built. Now, as South Korea stands with their second acting President in the last month, the country’s institutions will need to continue to uphold their resilience and strength as the courts [navigate this increasingly complex legal question](#). Most notably, the South Korean economy and its strong industrial base have remained a stable force amidst this crisis, showing its robustness on the international financial markets.

While keeping an eye on how the situation unfolds, the EU should prepare to engage with a new government once in place and political stability returns, especially vis-a-vis the situation in Ukraine and North Korea’s involvement in the conflict. Equally, emphasis should be put on Japan and the continuation of strengthening ROK-Japan relations. South Korea has been a strong and stable, “like-minded” EU partner in the region. Their mutually beneficial economic ties still hold significant potential for growth and to enhance their partnership.

## List of Mentioned Individuals – Who is Who

President Yoon Suk-Yeol	13th President of South Korea. Declared martial law in December 2024 and is currently undergoing impeachment procedures.
Kim Yong-hyun	Minister of National Defense from 6 September 2024 until his resignation on 5 December 2024.
Han Dong-hoon	Leader of People Power Party from July to December 2024, led a faction within the PPP against President Yoon Suk-Yeol.
Han Duck-soo	Acting president of South Korea from 14 to 27 December 2024 and the prime minister of South Korea from 2022.
Lee Jae-myung	Member of the National Assembly and leader of the Democratic Party of Korea since 2022.
Choi Sang-mok	Acting president and acting prime minister since 27 December 2024. He has also served as the deputy prime minister and minister of Economy and Finance since December 2023.



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