

From Declaration to Repeal: Overnight Martial Law in Korea

4 December 2024



Source: Yonhap news

On December 3, 2024, **President Yoon Suk Yeol declared martial law in South Korea**, citing national security threats. This marked the first martial law declaration since 1979 and was swiftly overturned by the National Assembly (NA) following public protests and political opposition, leading to its repeal within hours.

The event has sparked discussions on **potential impeachment proceedings and investigations**, raising questions about the nation's political stability and governance. As the nation grapples with the aftermath, this newsletter examines the background motivation, and ongoing political, economic, and social implications.



Justification for the declaration

President Yoon cited eliminating "pro-North Korean anti-state forces that are plundering the people's freedom and happiness " and protecting "the liberal Korea and its liberal constitutional order" as the rationale for his declaration of emergency martial law.

Yoon described the National Assembly as "den of criminals" and stated that the National Assembly is paralyzing the executive branch and the judicial branch through repeated impeachment attempts on key government officials such as the Minister of Interior, Minister of National Defense, Chairperson of the Korea Communications Commission and the Chair of the Board of Audit and Inspection, and the opposition party's one-sided budget cut is causing chaos to public safety and people's livelihood.

Reporting indicates that the Minister of National Defense recommended martial law, and the President declared it after the Cabinet meeting review. Latest information suggests that the Cabinet members were only made aware of the agenda on site, and many of them strongly opposed to the idea, including the Prime Minister, but the President made the declaration regardless with his own authority.

Exact motivation behind Yoon's decision remains unclear. Many are saying that it is a grave misjudgment of reality and political situation.

Political burden on President Yoon has been piling up over the past months. Personally, Yoon has been up against the persistently low approval rating and misconducts on the suspected election meddling in previous elections.

Opposition-led National Assembly has been pressuring President Yoon on multiple fronts. Votes on the impeachment of the Chair of the Board of Audit and Inspection, and on the appointment of a special prosecutor to investigate the First Lady's potential misconducts were respectively scheduled to take place on 4 and 10 December. Also, the Democratic Party proposed a FY2025 government budget plan with decreased funding for many of the programs that ruling People Power Party have prioritized.

Pundits suggest that the martial law might have been a show of force by President Yoon to threaten the National Assembly and bring them back to the negotiation table, demonstrating that the President can also utilize its constitutional power if necessary.

Motivation behind

Timeline (as of 3pm, 4 December 2024)

3 Dec

- 10:28pm** ● **President Yoon declares 'emergency martial law'**, vowing to 'eradicate pro-North Korean forces'
- 10:40pm ● **DP** calls all members to return to the NA for emergency meeting
- 10:50pm ● **Han Dong-hoon**, PPP Leader, calls Yoon's actions "unjustified," pledges party's support for ending state of emergency
- NA Police Security Guard lock down the NA entrance, limiting entry to parliament members only
- 11:14pm ● **NA Speaker Woo Won-shik** summons all NA members to convene for an emergency plenary session
- 11:30pm ● **Park An-su**, the Army Chief, is appointed as martial law commander and immediately announces the first martial statement
- 11:50pm ● **ROK 1st Airborne Division** arrives at the NA building

4 Dec

- 00:06am ● **Ministries** (e.g., Ministry of Trade Industry, and Energy, Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, and Transport)) and **local governments (Gyeonggi, Seoul, Incheon, etc.)** call emergency meetings
- 00:38am ● **Some ROK 1st Airborne Division** personnel gain entry into the NA building
- 00:48am ● **NA** begins plenary session
- 1:03am** ● **NA members** present unanimously (190-0) vote in favor of calling for the repeal of martial law (DP 172, PPP 18)
- 1:14am ● **ROK 1st Airborne Division** remaining on NA grounds return to base, but martial law remains in effect until lifted by the President
- 3:25am ● **PPP** issues statement requiring Yoon to end state of emergency per NA's resolution
- 4:15am ● **DP** declares that Yoon's declaration is an act of rebellion
- 4:29am ● **President Yoon** announces intent to end martial law
- 4:30am** ● **Cabinet** agrees to lift martial law, officially ending the state of emergency
- 4:40am ● **DP** releases an official statement calling for President's resignation
- 7:00am ● **PPP Leader Han** calls for the President to leave the party, all cabinet members to resign, and immediate dismissal of Defense Minister Kim Yong-hyun
- 10:12am ● **Senior aides at the Office of President** offer to resign "en masse"
- 12:54pm ● **Prime Minister and cabinet members** consider collective resignation

Photography footage



Police forces controlling access at the front gate of the National Assembly (Source: News 1)



A crowd surrounding military vehicles. (Source: The New York Times)



National Assembly staff blocking soldiers' entry by spraying fire extinguishers. (Source: Yonhap News)



A barricade made of chairs and cushions at the NA (Source: The New York Times)



Helicopters overhead (Source: The New York Times)



Han Dong-hoon and Lee Jae-myung respectively expressing statements after the resolution being passed in the NA. (Source: Cheonji Ilbo)

이재명 "국회 지켜달라" 안동훈 "계엄선포 잘못된 것" 가

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김병기	김상욱	김상훈	김석기	김선교	김성원	김성환	김소희	김승수	김승원	김영호
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김준혁	김태년	김태선	김태호	김한규	김형동	김희정	나경원	오경종	문대림	박대술
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박해철	박형수	배준영	배원진	백종현	서명욱	서범수	서일준	서지영	서천호	성일종
송석준	송언석	송옥주	신동욱	신성범	신영대	안규백	안상훈	안철수	안효영	임태영
오세희	우재준	위성박	유동수	유상범	柳榮夏	유용원	윤상현	윤영석	윤재욱	윤종근
윤준병	윤한홍	이강일	이기현	이달희	이만희	이상취	이상권	이양수	이연희	이인선
이인영	이정문	이정현	이종배	이종욱	이철규	이희식	李憲昇	이훈기	이우하	임이자
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국회, 비상계엄 해제 요구 결의안 상정

Resolution demanding the lifting of martial law being passed by the National Assembly. (Source: Yonhap News, MBC News)

Prospect and implications to Korea's political landscape

Three major scenarios dominate South Korea's current political discourse: potential impeachment of President Yoon, investigations into rebellion charges, and the possibility of his resignation. Following senior staff expressing resignation intents, the presidential office remains silent, increasing attention to the National Assembly (NA) and political parties to shape the next steps.

Opposition parties:

The Democratic Party (DP) has issued a resolution demanding President Yoon's immediate resignation. If he refuses, they plan to move forward with impeachment. The proposed timeline includes introducing an impeachment motion today, reporting it to the National Assembly on 5 December, and voting on it in the plenary session on December 6 or 7.

Ruling party:

Within the People Power Party (PPP), opinions differ on martial law and President Yoon's future. An emergency supreme council meeting demanded Yoon's resignation from the party, the dismissal of all cabinet members, and the removal of the Defense Minister. However, the PPP leadership favors focusing on rebellion-related investigations rather than impeachment, due to concerns stemming from former President Park Geun-hye's impeachment. They worry impeachment could lead to an early election, potentially paving the way for DP leader Lee Jae-myung to win the presidency and overshadow his own judicial challenges.

Public sentiment and civic action:

Daily life has largely resumed to normalcy, with schools and businesses reopening. Businesses are being encouraged to operate as usual, with the Vice Prime Minister pledging continued support to ensure economic recovery.

However, public protests continue outside government buildings, with citizens demanding accountability and assurances against future overreach. This weekend's major rally is expected to significantly shape political dynamics. Public opinion played a pivotal role in President Park Geun-hye's impeachment, with six months of candlelight protests driving bipartisan support for her removal.

Securing of 200 votes in the National Assembly:

If the DP leads the push for impeachment, the initial challenge will be securing the 200 votes required to pass the impeachment motion. To achieve this, cooperation from pro-Han members within the PPP would be essential. Currently, pan-opposition members hold a total of 192 seats, falling short of the necessary threshold.

Key hurdles to the impeachment motion

Constitutional Court's review:

The next hurdle would be the Constitutional Court's review process, which must be completed within 180 days. However, the Constitutional Court currently operates with only six of nine justices due to political gridlock over appointments. According to Article 23, Paragraph 1 of the Constitutional Court Act, at least seven justices must be present, and six must agree on decisions.

The opposition is pushing for swift appointments to fill the vacancies, but without presidential approval, the court remains understaffed, stalling the impeachment process. If the impeachment motion passes, President Yoon's duties will be suspended, and Prime Minister Han Duck-soo will serve as interim President, potentially enabling the appointment of Constitutional Court justices.

Business implications

Measures by Finance Authorities:

- Unlimited Liquidity Support: The Finance Ministry pledged to inject "unlimited" liquidity into financial markets, including stocks, bonds, short-term money markets, and forex, until markets fully stabilize.
- Emergency Repo Operations: The Bank of Korea introduced special repo operations to provide liquidity to financial institutions and stabilize the credit market.

Policy discussions on hold:

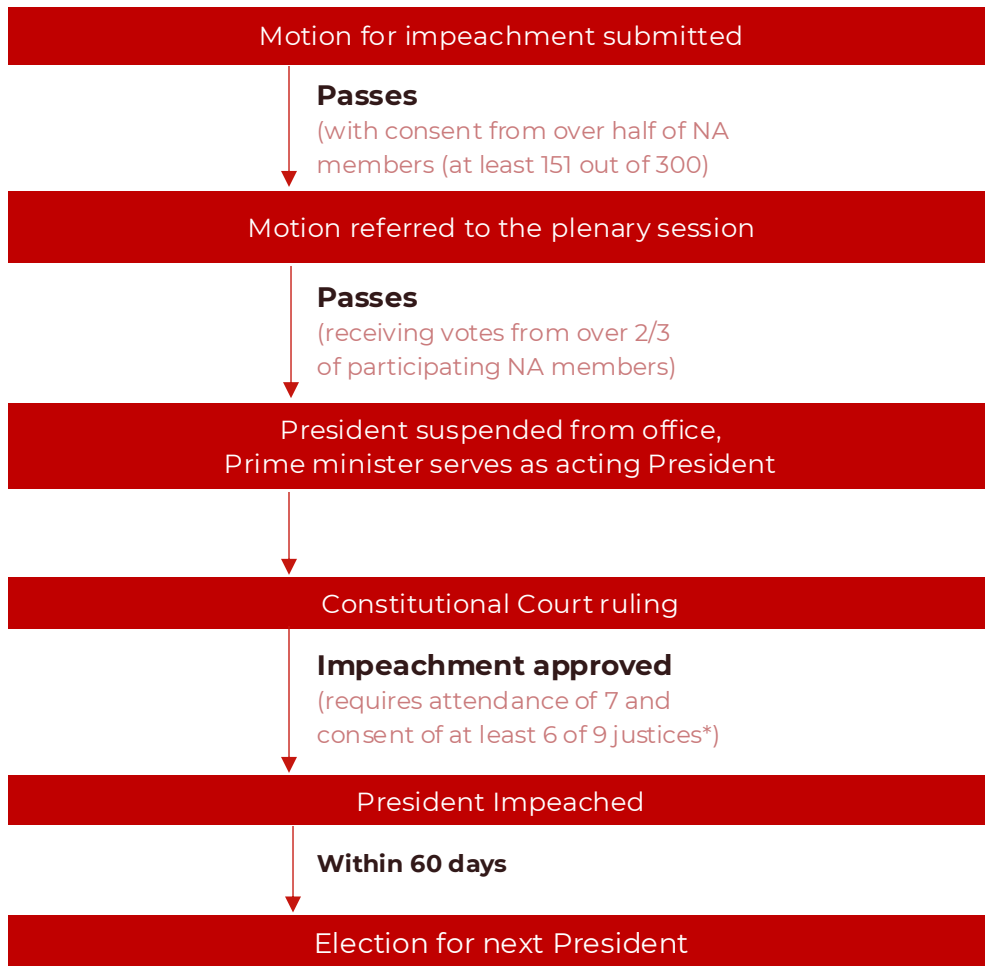
- Legislative delays: Policy discussions and bill development on specific agenda are likely to face delays as political discourse dominates proceedings in the National Assembly.

Power dynamics:

- PPP leadership and policy review: Changes within PPP leadership and direction should be monitored closely. Key figures and policy priorities may shift, requiring reassessment.
- DP's growing influence: As the Democratic Party is gaining more political leverage, adjust advocacy strategy to strengthen partnership and reflect evolving political landscape.



Reference: The Impeachment Process



*The Constitutional Court is composed of 9 justices; however, currently, only six justices are in office.

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