

South Korea President Withdraws Martial Law 6 Hours After Decree: Here's What to Know

The president's opposition party said it was 'essentially a coup d'état.'

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South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol speaks during a press briefing at the presidential office in Seoul, South Korea, on Dec. 3, 2024. South Korea Unification Ministry via AP



By Jacob Burg

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After South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol issued a surprising edict late on Dec. 3 invoking martial law to quell what he said to be anti-state forces in the opposition party, lawmakers in the nation's Parliament quickly assembled to revoke the declaration in an early-morning session as military personnel attempted to halt their vote.

In roughly six hours, during which 190 Parliament members voted to lift the order, the incident came to a close.

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Yoon said early on Dec. 4 local time that he would reverse his declaration.

"I have accepted the decision made by the National Assembly to dissolve and lift the martial law," Yoon said during a televised address from the presidential office in Yongsan.

"The troops deployed for martial law affairs have been withdrawn."

Yoon made the announcement after South Korean lawmakers criticized the order, with some calling it a "coup d'état," and after protesters clashed with troops outside the Parliament building during what some analysts said to be one of the country's biggest political crises in decades.

The incident also caused alarm worldwide, particularly in the United States, which has counted South Korea among its allies since the nation has supported a democratic government since the last military coup in the 1980s.

The Biden administration is watching the events unfolding in South Korea with "grave concern," U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell told reporters before Yoon lifted the declaration on Dec. 4.

Here's what we know so far about Yoon's martial law declaration.

When the South Korean president invoked martial law, he said that leaders in the opposing liberal Democratic Party were sympathizing with communist North Korea, engaging in “anti-state activities plotting rebellion.”

The leader did not expound on the allegation and offered no specific evidence.

Yoon won the 2022 election by a margin of less than 1 percent over Lee Jae-myung, leader of the Democratic Party.

This year, Lee’s party won back majority control of South Korea’s Parliament and had voiced disagreements over next year’s budget bill.

Democratic lawmakers had also tried to pass motions to impeach three top prosecutors, including those who were investigating Lee, who was accused and recently cleared of allegedly ordering a witness to give false testimony in a 2019 trial connected to an election law violation.

Lee, who has likened himself to Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), was recently **convicted** of violating election law for making false statements as a presidential candidate during the 2022 campaign. He was sentenced to a one-year suspended prison term.

Lee is also **facing** several other legal battles, including an allegation that he tried to force a local businessman into wiring millions in illegal payments to North Korea in an effort to set up a visit to the northern neighbor that never materialized.

Compared to Yoon, Lee has taken a more friendly stance towards the Chinese regime. During a campaign rally in March, Lee **criticized** Yoon for his remarks about Beijing’s military drill encircling Taiwan.

“Why are you provoking China?” Lee said at the time. “What does the Taiwan issue have to do with South Korea?”

Yoon’s allegation of North Korean collusion is similar to a tactic used by past South Korean dictatorships, which ended in the late 1980s.

According to a 1997 [article](#) from the Washington International Law Journal, Maj. Gen. Chun Doo-hwan's regime used the same justification for invoking martial law in response to protests after his military coup in 1979.

Both Parties Condemn Martial Law

Lee called the president's declaration "illegal and unconstitutional."

Han Dong-hoon, the leader of Yoon's conservative People Power Party (PPP), called the order "wrong" and promised to "stop it with the people."

Kim Dong Yeon, the opposition Democratic Party governor of the Gyeonggi province, which surrounds Seoul, called the order an "atrocious" that has taken his country "back 45 years."

"The people will block the president's anti-constitutional step. The military must be on the side of the public in any case. Let's resolutely oppose it," Kim said in a post on X, writing in Korean.

Hours later, after Parliament had officially voted to lift the order, Kim said Yoon was no longer a "target of impeachment," but a "target of arrest."

"President Yoon Suk Yeol's '2-hour coup' has pushed the country to the edge of a cliff," Kim said in a follow-up post on X. "In just a few hours, our economy has fluctuated greatly. An economy in ruins. A society in chaos."

Yoon's Political Struggles

After narrowly defeating Lee in the 2022 presidential election, Yoon has faced criticism domestically, with an approval rating hovering around 20 percent for months.

Yoon has had to deal with a Parliament controlled by the opposition party since he assumed office. His own PPP suffered a landslide loss in this year's election, losing seats in the unicameral assembly.

Conservatives from the PPP had alleged that members of the opposing Democratic Party were working against them in Parliament as political revenge for investigating Lee, who may run for president again in 2027.



South Korea's main opposition Democratic Party leader Lee Jae-myung arrives at a court in Seoul, South Korea, on Nov. 25, 2024. Kim Hong-Ji/AFP via Getty Images

Yoon and First Lady Kim Keon Hee were also accused of improperly influencing the PPP to select a specific candidate to run for a 2022 parliamentary by-election at the request of election broker Myung Tae-kyun.

Yoon recently denied wrongdoing in response to the accusations, which hampered his approval ratings.

South Korea's History of Martial Law

South Korea's democratic history only dates back to the late 1980s, and martial law has remained a sensitive subject as past dictatorships repeatedly invoked it to quell opposition.

Several dictatorships emerged after South Korea rebuilt itself following the 1950–53 Korean War, with some leaders invoking martial law to position soldiers, armored vehicles, and tanks in public places and streets to quash political demonstrations.

In 1961, dictator Park Chung-hee led several thousand troops into Seoul during the early morning hours in the nation's first successful coup d'état.

Park would rule South Korea for 20 years before his spy chief assassinated him in 1979. The dictator occasionally declared martial law to end protests and imprison his critics.

Less than two months after Park's death, Maj. Gen. Chun Doo-hwan pushed a procession of troops and tanks into the nation's capital in December 1979, instigating South Korea's second successful coup.

After a pro-democracy movement arose in the southern city of Gwangju a year later, Chun directed his military to massacre at least 200 people.

Massive protests in the summer of 1987 forced Chun's government to allow direct presidential elections, which marked the start of South Korea's democracy.

Resign or Face Impeachment

The opposition Democratic Party is calling on Yoon to resign or face impeachment.

“President Yoon Suk Yeol's martial law declaration was a clear violation of the constitution. It didn't abide by any requirements to

declare it,” the Democratic Party said in a [statement](#) issued on Dec. 4.

“His martial law declaration was originally invalid and a grave violation of the constitution. It was a grave act of rebellion and provides perfect grounds for his impeachment.”

In South Korea, impeaching the president would require a two-thirds majority of the Parliament or 200 of its 300 members. The Democratic Party and other small opposition parties have 192 seats together.

Eighteen PPP lawmakers joined 172 lawmakers in a vote to overturn Yoon’s martial law declaration.

The Associated Press, Reuters, Andrew Thornebrooke, Eva Fu, and Frank Fang contributed to this report.

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