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# South Korean Democracy: Back to the Brink

SNU Democracy Cluster

The martial law declaration by President Yoon Suk-yeol on December 3, 2024, had been nearly impossible to foresee. This unprecedented move—deploying the military to suspend the constitutional order for the first time in decades—not only sent shockwaves through South Korean society but also drew intense global attention. Above all, the political uncertainty it unleashed within South Korea persists, and there are growing concerns that antagonistic polarization will escalate even further.

In response to the keen interest of international readers on the state of South Korean democracy, the *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding* is expediting this publication of a dialogue of experts on the martial law crisis and the issue of political polarization in South Korea. The dialogue was organized by the Democracy Cluster of the Institute for Future Studies at Seoul National University and compiled in response to the editor's request, with participating Korean experts presenting their opinions in written form. The experts were given the opportunity to review and revise the edited manuscript. To preserve the dialogue format, references and source citations have been kept to a minimum.

## Dialogue Participants

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**(LEEM) To begin with, why do you think President Yoon took such an extraordinary step?**

**(JHEE)** Many political commentaries have highlighted various factors, including his personality, political circumstances, "winner takes all" political institutions and political culture that foster political polarization, socio-economic conditions, historical legacies, and the international environment. Among the various explanations, the one that received the most attention focused on Yoon Suk-yeol's personal characteristics. Yoon Suk-yeol is known for negative traits and habits such as excessive drinking, arrogance, veneration of superstitions, extreme anti-communist views, and hostility towards progressive politicians. For example, some critics may describe Yoon's proclamation of martial law as an unexpected, bizarre action, attributing it to his underdeveloped frontal lobes caused by his excessive drinking. Others may also focus on his addiction to watching YouTube broadcasts by the extremely conservative politician Ko Sung-kuk.

**(SONG)** One explanation for Korea's political crisis can be attributed to the idiosyncratic personal character and political career of President Yoon. Prior to his nomination as the presidential candidate of the conservative opposition party, he had no experience as an elected politician, having spent his entire career as a prosecutor. While political experience is not necessarily a prerequisite for good governance, Yoon's lack of such experience may have hindered his ability to develop essential political communication skills and to appreciate the importance of political compromise and negotiation. As a political outsider, President Yoon won the country's most critical election by a narrow margin of 0.73%—just 240,000 votes—but he failed to heed the concerns of other political voices, including those within his own party. This disregard contributed to the ruling party's poor performance in the National Assembly election in April 2024. Lacking established political networks, President Yoon relied primarily on a small circle of bureaucrats and political supporters within the ruling party.

**(JHEE)** While analyses focusing on the president's personality or temperament are not entirely meaningless, they tend to underestimate the structural and institutional causes of the coup and suggest only superficial solutions like personnel changes through a rapid reelection of a new president. This approach overlooks the various historical, socio-economic, and institutional factors at play and can be misused to avoid addressing the necessary improvements for restoring democracy. Similarly, analyses focusing on his ideological tendencies also fall short. Some extremely conservative politicians advocating for Yoon describe the coup as stemming from his "patriotism" or "passion" to protect "liberal democracy" from anti-state "left-wing cartels." Such claims, though perhaps surprising, portray his declaration of martial law as a patriotic act based on

good intentions, and are amplified by conservative political parties, media, and conservative protestant church organizations led by ultra-conservative preacher Jeon Kwang-hoon.

**(S. LEE)** This is likely the question on everyone's mind. And the answer, encapsulated in Oxford's 2024 Word of the Year, "brain rot," might surprise you. No, this is not a joke. Yoon justified the imposition of martial law in a brief speech that was so absurd and detached from reality that no one initially believed it. However, evidence has since emerged suggesting that his speech genuinely reflected his beliefs.

Yoon stated in his speech, "Our National Assembly has become a den of criminals, paralyzing the nation's judicial and administrative systems through legislative dictatorship and attempting to overthrow the liberal democratic system." In this speech, Yoon outlined three objectives for declaring martial law. First, to "defend the Republic of Korea from the threats posed by North Korean communist forces." Second, to "eradicate, in one sweep, the shameless pro-North, anti-state forces that are plundering the freedom and happiness of our people." Third, to "uphold the liberal constitutional order."

It seems that Yoon sincerely believed in a conspiracy theory that painted the opposition party as a group of North Korean spies attempting to overthrow South Korea. He seemed to view martial law as a legitimate means to dismantle the opposition's so-called "legislative dictatorship." He repeatedly used extreme expressions such as "eradication" and "elimination" when referring to the opposition party and citizens who opposed him. He labeled the opposition as "the root of all evil that has continuously engaged in destructive acts" and "an anti-state force seeking to overthrow the system." He asserted that martial law was the only means to protect South Korea from this opposition.

Where did Yoon's radical mindset originate? When Yoon was elected in 2022, his image was neither extreme nor partisan. His campaign slogan was "Fairness and Common Sense." As a former Prosecutor General of South Korea with no prior political experience, he was able to win the election by emphasizing a fresh and neutral image, untainted by establishment politics. But it is already widely known that Yoon was deeply engrossed in far-right YouTube channels. He repeatedly appointed far-right YouTubers to senior positions, including minister and vice-minister levels. Even after the failed insurrection, he appointed another far-right YouTuber to a minister-level position. Even South Korea's conservative media outlets, which were generally favorable toward Yoon and his People Power Party, had warned about his preference for YouTubers as early as the beginning of his term. His shocking speech declaring martial law almost sounded like a direct copy of the rhetoric used by far-right YouTube channels in South Korea.

The clearest indication of far-right YouTube's influence on Yoon is his belief in election fraud conspiracy theories. The People Power Party, which has

historically performed far better than the liberal Democratic Party in legislative elections, suffered shocking defeats in 2016, 2020, and 2024. The losses in 2020 and 2024 were particularly overwhelming, with the opposition securing nearly two-thirds of the total seats—enough to amend the constitution. These defeats fueled election fraud claims among some conservative politicians.

Until Yoon's declaration of martial law, however, such conspiracy theorists had been dismissed as an extreme fringe, largely marginalized even within conservative circles. Yet Yoon's attempted coup demonstrated that these election fraud conspiracies, quietly propagated and amplified through YouTube, had gained significant traction—far beyond what many had assumed.

It remains uncertain whether Yoon genuinely believed in election fraud conspiracy theories or merely used them as a justification for declaring martial law. However, on December 12, 2024, he released a statement from his residence, where he had gone into seclusion, in which he spoke at length about alleged flaws in South Korea's electoral system and the possibility of fraud. He claimed that the very purpose of declaring martial law was to investigate these supposed irregularities. Yoon even went so far as to attempt to seize control of the National Election Commission. On December 3, Yoon deployed hundreds of troops not only to the National Assembly but also to the National Election Commission in an attempt to seize election materials, aiming to uncover proof of election fraud by the opposition.

Yoon was living entirely within his own fabricated reality. It seems that he initiated the insurrection out of desperation, as he faced imminent exposure of a political scandal involving both himself and the first lady—ironically, accusations that they had rigged the election results. Yoon's extreme, binary view of the opposition—not as a political counterpart but as an enemy to be eradicated—combined with his authoritarian tendencies and his unwillingness to accept the reality of the opposition's landslide victory in the general election, proved to be a highly destructive mix when fueled by far-right YouTube narratives. Furthermore, his declining approval ratings and growing criticism from within his own party likely pushed him toward even more radical measures.

By early December 2024, a special prosecutor bill targeting both Yoon and the first lady, initiated by the opposition, was gaining traction. With some ruling party lawmakers expressing support, the bill stood a strong chance of passing in the National Assembly. Faced with this crisis, Yoon saw martial law as a way to overturn the situation in one decisive move.

**(JHEE)** It should also be noted that the legislative decision to cut government budget for 2025 and its attempt to investigate his wife Kim Geon-hee's misbehavior triggered the proclamation of the martial law. President Yoon sought to lead the government not through cooperation with the National Assembly but by declaring the emergency martial law and occupying the National Assembly with

military force. Although he denied these actions during the judicial impeachment procedure, he was suspected of arresting and detaining lawmakers for violating martial law, subduing the National Assembly by suspending budget payments, and operating the government through repeated martial law if necessary. However, it was clear that the cabinet deliberation process required for proclaiming martial law was incomplete and that the military blockade and intrusion of the National Assembly were illegal and unconstitutional, leading to the National Assembly's decision to impeach him as the leader of the coup, with his arrest imminent.

This coup is a typical "self-coup," where unconstitutional and illegal means were used to maintain or strengthen executive power. In this regard, it is very similar to the attempt by Peruvian President Pedro Castillo in 2022 to dissolve the legislature when faced with impeachment. Just before the declaration of martial law, Myung Tae-kyun's revelations exposed Yoon Suk-yeol and his wife Kim Geon-hee's involvement in nominating Kim Yeong-seon as a legislative candidate in a by-election, prompting the opposition to push for a special legislative investigation. Even Han Dong-hoon, the leader of the ruling People Power Party, partially supported the opposition's claims.

**(YOON)** I'd like to add on to what has been said about the importance of Yoon's personality. Structural or institutional approaches dominant in political science tend to dismiss leaders' personal characteristics in terms of "actor dispensability" and "action dispensability." However, according to Fred Greenstein, there are some structures and situations when leaders' personalities make a crucial difference; for example, when a leader is structurally placed in a strategic location with concentrated power and/or in new situations with no precedents, where institutions are in conflict, are complex or where different people focus on different cues, and are laden with symbolic and emotional significance, reflecting deeply-held values. I believe we can easily agree that Mr. Yoon, as president, placed himself in such structures and situations in which the negative consequences of his antidemocratic, authoritarian personality and his friend-versus-foe seize mentality were maximized.

**(LEEM) The influence of YouTube and the proliferation of conspiracy theories have been recognized as significant factors contributing to the recent crisis. In fact, the broader shifts in the media landscape continue to exacerbate antagonistic and biased perceptions within South Korean society.**

**(CHONG)** Under both the progressive Moon Jae-in administration and the conservative Yoon Suk-yeol administration, the press has faced attacks from both political camps. The Moon administration viewed conservative media with hostility, while the Yoon administration has accused progressive media of disseminating false information to discredit the presidency. The dominant term

shaping Korea's media and information landscape over the past years has been "fake news."

In South Korea, "fake news" has often been used not to denote falsehoods that threaten public welfare but rather to delegitimize opposing views and critics. The Moon administration attempted to introduce punitive damages for "intentional or grossly negligent false reports" through a proposed amendment to the Press Arbitration Act. Although the ruling Democratic Party insisted that only proven malicious intent would trigger punitive damages, such intent could be subjectively interpreted by those in power. The bill faced strong opposition from the press, which feared it could stifle investigative journalism and watchdog reporting. Ultimately, the bill was abandoned amid ongoing debates on "media suppression" versus "fake news prevention."

The Yoon administration has taken a more explicit approach, replacing the term "disinformation" used by the previous government with the more politically charged term "fake news." Its aggressive stance has been operationalized through raids and criminal complaints against journalists critical of the government. The Korea Communications Commission proposed a "one-strike-out" policy, threatening to shut down media outlets that disseminate fake news, even for a single instance. This administrative censorship blatantly contravenes constitutionally guaranteed press freedoms. Furthermore, the Korea Communications Standards Commission imposed fines totaling KRW140 million on news organizations, including *Newstapa*, *MBC*, *KBS*, *YTN*, and *JTBC*, for airing reports critical of Yoon based on sources' testimonies. The judiciary later suspended these penalties, exposing them as an overreach of administrative authority. The Yoon administration has thus adopted a coercive approach, using state institutions to arbitrarily define and penalize "fake news."

However, despite publicly declaring his commitment to eradicating fake news both domestically and internationally, President Yoon has been deeply engrossed in the election fraud conspiracy theory repeatedly propagated by far-right YouTube channels. This was publicly declared by President Yoon himself through a national address and a handwritten letter following the failure of martial law. The paradox of a leader who advocates for the eradication of fake news while simultaneously embracing and amplifying misinformation demonstrates how the term "fake news" can be arbitrarily wielded as a tool for media suppression by those in power.

Before his arrest, President Yoon told close political allies, "Legacy media is too biased, so look for well-organized information on YouTube." During his testimony at the Constitutional Court amid his impeachment trial, he further stated, "In South Korea, the National Assembly and the media hold supreme power," portraying himself as a victim of media oppression. As the head of the executive branch, the president not only undermined the press—a fundamental institution essential to maintaining democracy—but also incited his supporters to

trust extreme internet influencers over traditional media.

Paradoxically, as the Yoon administration intensified its crackdown on fake news, fact-checking initiatives have been weakened. Launched in 2017, SNU FactCheck—South Korea's only nonprofit, nonpartisan fact-checking platform, hosted by Seoul National University's (SNU) Institute of Communication Research—suspended operations indefinitely in August 2024. Since its inception, SNU FactCheck faced legal and financial pressure from conservative parties and lawsuits over alleged political bias. After courts dismissed these claims, financial pressure was exerted on platform companies supporting the initiative, leading to funding cuts. The government's anti-fake news agenda, therefore, appears less concerned with promoting factual accuracy and more focused on labeling unfavorable reporting as fake news. Rather than aiding voters in making informed decisions or combating public health misinformation and hate speech, it has functioned as a political instrument to suppress dissent.

Meanwhile, as the term "fake news" has been politically weaponized and fact-checking activities suppressed, YouTube has become the dominant space for public discourse in South Korea. The platform hosts both high-quality content and misinformation, accommodating far-left and far-right falsehoods alike. The problem lies in its algorithm, which reinforces ideological biases by continuously feeding users content that aligns with their views. This echo chamber effect has fueled societal polarization, with South Korea witnessing extreme consequences—such as an assassination attempt on an opposition leader by an individual radicalized by right-wing misinformation and President Yoon, influenced by conspiracy theories, declaring martial law.

**(YOON)** On a different note, we have to pay attention to who has been mobilized to Yoon's side by disinformation and/or misinformation campaigns, and what they have done. No official statistics are available, obviously. Some Korea media has reported that younger generation males in their twenties and thirties increasingly join the group, which largely consists of individuals, including seniors, North Korean defectors, and the poor, who allegedly live off payments from far-right leaders and entities connected to similar cult religious sects. I believe most of them are not well informed, and they seem to identify liberal democracy and conservatism with hardline anti-communism, anti-North Korean regime, and anti-China positions. They hate opposition leader Lee Jae-myung and all those on the opposition side who stand in Yoon's (and hence their) way.

These so-called ultra-conservatives glorify the rapid economic growth that occurred under authoritarian leaders, especially former president Park Geun-hye. The older participants appear to want to revive or relive those good old days when they believe an us-versus-them mentality was never challenged. Of course, that would be impossible, but they don't want to admit that. So, they meet regularly in person and online to confirm their shared misguided belief that they

are not the minority, which is reinforced by those cult leaders who openly incite riots and martyrdom. Some followers of these cult leaders have already done their bidding. Many have attacked the court, which never happened in the past, even in the heyday of democratization, and a few set themselves on fire in public space.

Those cult leaders and demagogues who use online platforms take advantage of mostly marginalized groups for monetary gain. Mr. Yoon and his elite advocates legitimize their violent, antidemocratic campaigns by publicly approving them, describing them as freedom fighters and patriotic movements. It's deplorable that Mr. Yoon is polarizing the country even further.

**(LEEM) The fact that the martial law declared by President Yoon was lifted within hours, with no serious violent clashes or bloodshed, is indeed one of the key characteristics of this crisis. What do you believe were the key factors that led to the failure of President Yoon's attempt to enforce martial law in such a short period?**

**(JHEE)** President Yoon's coup ultimately failed. Despite the high success rate of self-coups, reported to be around 80 percent, Yoon's coup ended within just six hours with the lifting of martial law. Instead of securing the submission of the National Assembly, Yoon faced impeachment proceedings and was arrested and prosecuted for charges of insurrection. Although the self-coup was a setback for democracy, resistance from citizens and the National Assembly's impeachment decision demonstrated a high level of democratic resilience.

While the reasons for the failure of the December 3 coup are as varied as its causes, they can safely be explained as fourfold: lack of justification, limited support from the military, well-established democratic norms in South Korea, and lack of international support. First, Yoon's assertions of a "legislative dictatorship" by opposition parties and a necessity to eliminate "anti-state" forces lacked compelling justification. The economic development and national security justifications used by nationalist military forces in past coups in underdeveloped countries were not applicable in 21st-Century South Korea.

Second, limited support from the military, cabinet members, and ruling People Power Party was another key reason for the failure of the coup. The coup was led by a very small number of military generals, but most soldiers dispatched to the National Assembly, unaware they were being used in a coup, were reluctant to engage in military operations within the National Assembly. Additionally, most cabinet members, including Prime Minister Han Duck-soo, opposed proclaiming martial law during the December 3 meeting.

Third, well-established democratic norms are also considered to be a crucial reason for the failure of the coup. The presence of citizens who gathered in front of the National Assembly and the lawmakers who participated in the resolution to lift martial law, even climbing over fences to do so, indicated that the rule of

law and democratic norms were already well-established in South Korean society. Lastly, despite Yoon's efforts to strengthen the South Korea-US alliance, he did not receive support from the US for the coup, which was yet another factor of its failure. The combination of these factors ensured the failure of Yoon's self-coup and highlighted the resilience of democratic institutions and norms in South Korea.

**(S. LEE)** At first, Yoon's coup appeared notably amateurish. Military coups typically follow a formula so predictable that one might deem it ritualistic: first seizing broadcast and newspaper offices and arresting key political figures and opposition forces, then proclaiming the coup's success to the public. Yoon, however, did not adhere to this formula and consequently argued that his intent was not to dissolve the National Assembly but to merely issue a warning to the opposition. Yet, in light of the past four months of media reports, parliamentary hearings, and most notably the unedited broadcasts of testimony during Yoon's impeachment trial at the Constitutional Court, it appears that Yoon's coup was meticulously planned for at least several months to a year or more. Indeed, Yoon strategically appointed loyal figures to the most crucial posts in preparation for executing the coup, and he met with them regularly—often over drinks—to conspire in detail.

Accordingly, Yoon's failure was not a result of a clumsy or impulsive plan. Rather, a series of minor coincidences and mistakes accumulated, and at decisive moments, paratroopers either passively or actively refused to carry out the coup orders. Moreover, opposition lawmakers had anticipated the possibility of a coup. Several months prior, they had questioned Minister of National Defense Kim Yong-hyun about whether a coup was in the works. While these lawmakers themselves may not have been entirely convinced of the coup's imminence, they were nonetheless prepared. The moment Yoon abruptly declared martial law, they convened at the National Assembly, and within roughly two hours, a sufficient number of representatives had gathered to revoke that declaration.

Most critically, however, the Korean public mounted active and resolute resistance. The Korean citizens actively thwarted Yoon's rebel forces. They demonstrated remarkable courage and an exceptional level of political awareness. Even before Yoon's speech ended, people began rushing to the National Assembly. By the time the airborne troops arrived at the National Assembly by helicopter, a dense crowd had already formed a human shield.

The failure of the coup was not due to a few heroic soldiers defying Yoon's orders. In fact, those soldiers, fully armed, made it all the way to the National Assembly. However, they hesitated when faced with the gathered citizens. If the National Assembly had been empty, they would have shut it down, making the vote to lift martial law impossible. In his subsequent statement, Yoon claimed he had no intention of arresting members of the National Assembly or shutting it down, insisting that he only intended to issue a warning. However,

this contradicts the testimony of numerous soldiers who spoke publicly in the National Assembly. The soldiers testified that Yoon had directly ordered them to break down the doors of the National Assembly and drag out its members. He reportedly prepared a list of about ten key legislators and issued orders for their arrest.

Due to painful experiences and a high level of civic education, Koreans knew exactly what dictators would do first in a coup. They rushed to the National Assembly before the dictator's forces could seize it and prevent a vote that would lift martial law. In doing so, they saved our democracy.

**(LEEM) In this case, we witnessed an extreme situation with the imposition of martial law by the sitting president. However, despite South Korean politics being evaluated as a "consolidated democracy," it has been operating with significant volatility and increasing polarization. The primary cause often cited for the defects of South Korean democracy is the so-called "imperial presidency." Shall we focus on these institutional flaws?**

**(SONG)** The institutional arrangements of South Korea's winner-takes-all system will not solve the political polarization that has exacerbated political conflicts over the past few decades. Many scholars and politicians have emphasized the need for the institutional reform, focusing on changes to the electoral system and constitutional revisions, to weaken the winner-takes-all features and decentralize the political power of the president. The 1987 political system, exemplified as the single five-year term presidency and the majoritarian electoral system, has faced several institutional challenges, as political and social changes have unfolded. Despite a series of debates and discussions about changing or revising the 1987 political system, no consensus has emerged on the direction of the reform.

**(J. LEE)** Although Korea's presidential system was influenced by the US model, it is structurally characterized by a significantly higher concentration of power in the presidency. This design reinforces the strong executive authority inherent in presidential systems, enabling the president to exert robust leadership across government operations. However, these structural features undermine the checks and balances that are fundamental to democratic governance, thereby increasing the risk of presidential power being abused.

For instance, unlike the US president, the Korean president does not require the National Assembly's consent when appointing ministers. This concentrates personnel authority entirely within the executive branch, making it challenging for the National Assembly to intervene in such matters. If the National Assembly fails to fulfill its role in overseeing ministerial appointments, the administration's function as a check-and-balance body will inevitably weaken. Additionally, the placement of the Board of Audit and Inspection directly under the president

has been criticized. The Board, tasked with monitoring and auditing corruption within the administration, risks losing its independence and neutrality due to its structural subordination to the president.

Another distinctive feature of the Korean presidential system is that the administration is granted the authority to introduce legislative bills. This allows the president to intervene in the legislative process of the National Assembly, thereby disrupting the balance of power between the executive and legislative branches. While this authority enables the administration to take the lead in shaping policy, it also raises concerns about undermining the autonomy and independence of the legislature.

Furthermore, the budget process employs an automatic budget bill reporting system, which further limits the National Assembly's ability to check the administration. Under this system, if the National Assembly delays its deliberation of the budget bill, the government's draft is automatically enacted. This arrangement weakens the legislature's influence over the budget, further tilting the balance of power in favor of the executive branch.

**(HAN)** The South Korean presidential system, although originally designed to prevent the excessive concentration of executive power, has repeatedly failed to do so over time. Despite incorporating several institutional features of a parliamentary system, it has tended to facilitate the rise of an imperialistic presidency. The distinct trajectory of historical development underscores the pressing need to critically examine the institutional viability of South Korean model.

At the outset, it remains uncertain, from an institutional perspective, whether the Korean Constitution inherently facilitates the excessive concentration of power in the hands of a single individual. While certain constitutional provisions were explicitly designed to curb the rise of an imperial presidency—a phenomenon often associated with the US presidential system—their effectiveness remains subject to debate. For instance, Article 63 of the South Korean Constitution grants the National Assembly the authority to pass a recommendation for the removal of the prime minister or a state council member from office who were appointed by the president. This provision, resembling the vote of no confidence found in parliamentary systems, stands in contrast to the US model, where the dismissal of cabinet members is, for the most part, at the sole discretion of the president.

Empirical studies, however, have frequently revealed outcomes that diverge from the expectation embedded in South Korea's institutional design. Han (2023), drawing on recent legislative data, evaluates the effectiveness of constitutional provisions intended to constrain presidential overreach and finds that they are largely ineffective—particularly in two key institutional areas.

First, although Article 52 of the South Korean Constitution grants both the executive and members of the National Assembly the authority to introduce bills, his study finds that this provision has not enhanced inter-branch coordination

in the legislative process. This conclusion is supported by a comparative analysis of bill success rates under conditions of a unified versus divided government. Despite shifts in partisan alignment, the high success rate of government-proposed bills has remained constant, suggesting that the president exercises legislative influence unilaterally. While one might attribute the high success rate of government-sponsored bills to long-standing executive-legislative cooperation, the stark contrast between the success rate of government bills and those introduced by Assembly members indicates a consistent pattern of presidential dominance. This trend was especially striking in the first half of President Yoon's term, during which 100 percent of bills proposed by his administration were passed, highlighting a more pronounced imperial presidency compared to that of his predecessors.

Second, legislative involvement in the appointment of cabinet members—another institutional design to curb the president's power—has proven ineffective in practice. According to Article 86 of the Constitution, the National Assembly must consent to the president's appointment of the Prime Minister. Building on this and other provisions, it has become standard to have confirmation hearings for all cabinet members (referred to as State Council members in South Korea). In theory, as Shugart and Carey (1992) argue, robust legislative oversight could constrain presidential power and allow cabinet members to act with greater independence. However, an examination of actual confirmation records reveals an opposite trend: presidents have increasingly bypassed or ignored legislative objections to their appointments. A comparison across the administrations of Park Geun-hye, Moon Jae-in, and Yoon Suk-yeol illustrates a steady decline in executive-legislative coordination. Under Park, over 80% of cabinet nominations received approval. This rate declined by approximately 10% under Moon and fell by an additional 15% under Yoon. Notably, during Yoon's presidency, nearly 40% of appointed cabinet members were confirmed despite objections from the National Assembly, which is a significant increase from approximately 10% during Park's administration.

These findings suggest that the challenges facing South Korea's presidential system are not primarily the result of individual characteristics of presidents. Rather, they are rooted in the structural characteristics of the system itself. This underscores the urgent need for institutional reform aimed at recalibrating the balance of power within South Korea's constitutional framework.

**(LEEM) While there has been considerable concern about the risks associated with the combination of a presidential system and a fragmented multiparty system, South Korea is experiencing a different challenge—the combination of a strong presidential system and a two-party system appears to be exacerbating political instability and polarization.**

**(YOON)** Political polarization—marked by ideological, social, and affective divisions among the political class, party activists, and the highly politically engaged—coupled with a winner-takes-all electoral system, effectively a two-party system, and an "imperial presidency," are suggested to have facilitated democratic backsliding in South Korea.

What about such polarization at the mass public level? There is some evidence that affective polarization has spread to the general public and that an antidemocratic movement has been mobilized to support autocratic leaders and an authoritarian successor party. In fact, South Korea is suggested to be one of the world's most politically polarized democracies. It is worth noting that the citizens of the US, where the electoral, party, and presidential systems are similar to South Korea's, also perceive South Korea's level of political polarization to be extreme.

**(S. W. LEE)** South Korea's democracy is facing a severe crisis. We must also closely examine and propose solutions to the structural problems inherent in South Korea's current political system, separate from the impeachment and punishment of President Yoon. It is well known that South Korea's political polarization has already surpassed critical levels. Of course, this does not justify unconstitutional or unlawful martial law in any way. Moreover, political polarization is not unique to South Korea but is rather a global trend. The problem lies in the fact that South Korea's political polarization is particularly severe compared to other advanced democracies, and this was the case even before the martial law crisis. While South Korea's political polarization was not as extreme during the early years following democratization in 1987, the current trend of affective polarization is now evident. This refers to increasing negative sentiments toward opposing parties, leading to heightened support for one's preferred party. This dynamic has driven the two main parties—the Democratic Party of Korea and the People Power Party—into even fiercer confrontations, resembling a state of "emotional civil war."

Recent economic inequality and rapid changes in the media environment likely contribute to political polarization in South Korea, as in other countries. The anonymity, openness, nonlinearity, and interactivity of social media have evidently accelerated this polarization. However, institutional factors unique to South Korea also play a significant role in exacerbating the political polarization. As I have argued several times in my other writings, the combination of presidentialism and a two-party system is a key institutional factor that perpetuates and amplifies political polarization in South Korea. Historically, it was widely believed that presidential systems were more successful at state governance and sustaining democracy when combined with a two-party system, rather than a multi-party system. This is because multi-party systems increase the likelihood of a divided government, which can cause conflicts between the executive and legislative branches. However, as political polarization deepens, the

institutional combination of a presidential system with a two-party system can lead to an endless cycle of conflict and division, as seen in both South Korea and the US.

In the past, both the president and the opposition found it difficult to sustain overtly unilateral political behaviors due to the risk of backlash and potential defection from the centrist voter bloc. However, in the current climate of political polarization, this concern seems to have diminished significantly for both. Both ruling and opposition parties now recognize that demonstrating consensus-oriented behavior to appeal to non-partisan voters might lead to the loss of their core, hardline supporters. Consequently, instead of trying to win over the non-partisan or centrist voters (who are seen as a difficult group to mobilize), they focus on minimizing defections among their fervent, fandom-driven support base. Of course, on election day, the silent centrist bloc can still play a decisive role in determining the outcome. For instance, in South Korea's twenty-second general election, the silent centrists seemed to lean toward the opposition, influenced by sentiments of holding the Yoon administration accountable. However, as political polarization deepens, their influence during election processes is likely to weaken further.

That is, the traditional democratic approach of expanding support by developing sophisticated policies and pledges to appeal to non-partisan or centrist voters is gradually being excluded from effective political strategies. Instead, both parties indiscriminately raise suspicions about each other's abuse of power or corruption through the media, and they partisanly use the investigative agencies, such as the prosecution service or special prosecutors elected by the National Assembly, to undermine each other's moral legitimacy. Consequently, "politics by other means," such as fake news and the judicialization of politics, has become increasingly prevalent.

**(LEEM) Then, it would be valuable to have a more in-depth discussion on which specific aspects of the presidential system should be reformed in order to mitigate antagonistic polarization and promote stable democratic governance.**

**(J. LEE)** Because the Korean presidential system systematically concentrates significant authority within the presidency, the public tends to attribute many political and policy outcomes directly to the president. While it is common in presidential systems to hold the president primarily accountable for policy decisions, this tendency is particularly pronounced in South Korea, where presidential power is relatively stronger. For instance, during the presidency of Roh Moo-hyun, the phrase "This is all because of Roh Moo-hyun" became a popular buzz-phrase, reflecting the public's inclination to attribute all social problems to the president. This mindset has persisted across administrations, fostering a recurring psychology of blaming the president regardless of broader

systemic factors.

In reality, however, there is often a mismatch between the president's institutional authority and their capacity to maintain, in practice, long-term actual power. As noted earlier, the president's strong institutional authority makes them particularly vulnerable to shifts in public perception. Any sign of weakness or controversy typically results in a significant decline in approval ratings. Historically, this phenomenon has been evident in South Korea, where presidential approval ratings have consistently declined after the initial term begins.

The single-term system exacerbates the decline in presidential approval ratings, as there is no practical way to recover from the downturn. This often leads to a rapid lame-duck period that begins early in the presidency. In contrast, two-term systems offer presidents the opportunity to regroup and consolidate their support by using a re-election campaign as a platform to reconnect with their base. However, under Korea's single-term system, such an opportunity is absent, making it nearly impossible for presidents to recover their political standing once approval ratings decline.

When a president's approval rating declines, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to effectively lead state affairs, despite their strong institutional authority. In the recent history of Korean politics, presidential approval ratings typically drop to around 30 percent by the third year of their term. When the approval rating is low, not only does the opposition party intensify its criticism, but members of the ruling party also tend to distance themselves from the president to secure political support.

Under Korea's single-term system, it is common for the next presidential candidates from the ruling party to emerge prominently midway through the incumbent president's term. When presidential approval ratings are low, the potential candidates often position themselves in opposition to the current president to bolster their profile. This dynamic exacerbates the decline of the president's actual power, making the loss of authority even more pronounced as their term progresses.

Korea's unique election system further widens the gap between the president's institutional authority and actual power. One key factor is the misalignment between the terms of the president and members of the National Assembly, making it challenging for the government to maintain consistent support in the legislature. In South Korea, general and local elections often disadvantage the ruling party, as they are frequently seen as opportunities for voters to express dissatisfaction with the incumbent administration. This dynamic creates significant obstacles for the sitting president to implement the policy changes and reforms they envision, which further diminishes the practical effectiveness of presidential power.

As a result, Korean presidents often find themselves in a position where

their actual power is significantly diminished in comparison to the high level of accountability they bear. In such situations, the presidents may be criticized for failing to fulfill their duties and could face various political pressures, including impeachment. To navigate this, presidents might attempt to govern by relying on their strong institutional authority, such as the right to veto legislation or issue presidential decrees. Furthermore, if such authority is overused, it could lead to an increased risk of resorting to inappropriate measures. Even when the president's actual power is greatly limited, there is room for the politically troubled president to abuse their authority because many institutional authorities including the emergency right are systematically guaranteed to the president. A notable example of this risk occurred in 2024 when President Yoon declared martial law.

To address these issues, it is crucial to provide the president with a means to resolve the gap that exists between their institutional authority and their actual power. One potential solution is to reduce the extensive institutional powers granted to the incumbent president. While the Korean presidential system has contributed to administrative efficiency by providing the president with strong authority, its overly concentrated structure weakens fundamental democratic principles, such as checks and balances.

**(S. W. LEE)** The reform options are unexpectedly simple. First of all, a transition to a four-year, two-term presidentialism through constitutional amendment could be considered. This option is the most frequently mentioned and publicly favored whenever constitutional reform discussions arise in South Korea. While proponents of a four-year, two-term presidentialism have presented various detailed reform plans, they generally converge on the idea of reducing presidential powers, particularly in areas like personnel appointments and budgeting, while strengthening the powers of the National Assembly. Such reform is expected to curb the indiscriminate exercise or private misuse of administrative powers, including prosecutorial authority, while encouraging the National Assembly, especially in cases of a divided government, to focus on effectively monitoring and supervising the executive branch in practical matters such as personnel appointments and budgeting, rather than overusing confrontational measures such as special investigations or impeachment motions.

However, if a four-year presidential system is adopted, it would be necessary to design the system so that midterm elections occur during the second year of the president's term, allowing them to serve as a de facto midterm evaluation of the incumbent administration. As is well known, one of the commonly cited weaknesses of presidential systems is the frequent emergence of divided governments. In many cases, therefore, institutional adjustments are suggested to synchronize the election cycles of the executive and legislative branches to address this issue. Nevertheless, the situation of a divided government can paradoxically

be viewed as a key mechanism of checks and balances inherent in the operation of this type of government form. Hence, it is more appropriate to view the proper functioning of a presidential system as achievable when the president and the legislature effectively overcome the challenges of a divided government and collaboratively contribute to the stable operation of government.양식의 맨 위

In addition, if constitutional reform is pursued to maintain the presidential system, it must be accompanied by electoral reform aimed at restructuring the party system into a multiparty one. To achieve this, specific measures must be considered, such as expanding the number of proportional representation seats in general parliamentary elections and introducing a runoff voting system for presidential elections. In particular, the electoral reform should aim to create three to four small-to-mid-sized parties with distinct policy lines, each holding approximately thirty seats.

A semi-presidential system could be an option, as it would allow for greater flexibility in governance by adapting to changes in the political landscape. Or, under the assumption that the two-party system remains intact, a constitutional amendment introducing a parliamentary system would likely result in a British-style parliamentary government form where the ruling party holds a majority, effectively preventing a divided government. However, there is limited support for these two options in South Korean society.

**(LEEM) In the coming months, political uncertainty in South Korea is expected to intensify significantly due to the upcoming presidential election and the ongoing debate over constitutional amendments. Amid these developments, it is crucial for South Korean society to once again demonstrate its democratic resilience. However, there are growing concerns that the process may exacerbate antagonistic polarization, potentially leading to a more severe regression of democracy. Beyond improvements in political institutions, what other challenges do you believe South Korean democracy must wisely navigate to further strengthen its democratic foundations?**

**(JHEE)** South Korea, having experienced a brief period of autocratization due to the self-coup of December 3, 2024, now faces the task of restoring democracy. The primary consideration is how to achieve transitional justice. This is crucial because political efforts that hinder or delay the investigation and punishment of the coup's leaders or that glorify or defend the coup under the guise of "freedom of expression," are still occurring.

Transitional justice encompasses various aspects, including legal punishment for perpetrators, compensation and fair treatment for victims, and proactive actions to avert future conflict. For the self-coup of December 3, achieving transitional justice requires fair investigations and trials regarding the planning and execution of the coup (involving truth-finding, punishment of perpetrators,

and apologies from perpetrators), restoration of democracy (via the election of a new president), and constitutional amendments for effective checks and balances and a consociation democracy.

**(YOON)** It has been suggested that South Koreans' support for undemocratic or strong leaders has been increasing sharply, particularly over recent years, while their endorsement of democracy has been decreasing. According to the latest World Values Survey (2017-2022), 70% of the South Korean respondents endorsed democracy, which is no surprise. Additionally, though, 67% of respondents supported a strongman rule, the majority embraced expert rule, and 17% even upheld army rule. A nationally representative survey, originally designed by the Democracy Cluster (DC) of the Institute for Future Strategy at SNU, collected data from July to August 2024 and shows a similar pattern—while the level of support for democracy is overwhelming (74%), the level of endorsement for a strong leader is still above the majority (55%). The DC data also show a strong support for expert rule (46%).

**(SONG)** Political turbulence is likely to continue for at least the next few months. South Korea's democracy, however, appears more resilient than initially expected, as shown in the rapid restoration of the political system. A series of peaceful demonstrations calling for President Yoon's impeachment and ousting have highlighted the Korean people's strong belief in democracy, both as a value and as a political system. Additionally, President Yoon accepted the National Assembly's vote on lifting martial law and the subsequent legal procedures. The citizens' protests and rallies amid the political crisis demonstrate the resilience of Korea's democracy, with strong popular support, despite two dividing political voices for and against President Yoon's impeachment.

The patterns of political participation by age and gender offer interesting insights into South Korea's democracy. The 386 generation (now the 586 generation) is well-known for its active role in the nation's democratization during the 1980s. When the National Assembly attempted but failed to pass an impeachment motion against President Yoon on December 7, 2024, more than two hundred thousand people gathered in front of the National Assembly, demanding his impeachment. Among them, around 30,050 middle-aged men in their fifties participated in the rally, making up approximately 15% of the participants. More notably, according to a BBC report, young women in their twenties constituted the largest group, with 35,962 participants (17% of the crowd). In contrast, only around 6,730 young men in their twenties participated, making up about 3.3% of the total.

On December 14, 2024, when the National Assembly attempted for a second time to pass the impeachment motion, more than 314,000 people participated in a political rally in support of impeachment. Similar to the previous rally, young

females in their twenties were the largest demographic group, while young males in their twenties made up only around 3.03% of the participants, according to *Yonhap News*. Unlike the 386/586 generation, young females in their twenties have no direct historical or political memories of democratization. They have not been mobilized by social and political groups; rather, most of them have attended the political rallies and demonstrations individually or in small groups of friends. Unlike traditional Korean political demonstrations, which are characterized by protest songs, political slogans, and chants, these young women gathered with colorful light sticks, signing along to K-pop songs, as if they were attending a K-pop concert. As a generation, they are the children of the 386/586 generation. Some have suggested that they have been raised and educated by parents with strong democratic values and practices, which may influence the political behaviors and values of the youth. However, this factor alone may not fully explain why young females' participation rates are significantly higher than their male counterparts.

Young males in their twenties had been enthusiastic participants in political rallies and demonstrations in 2008 and 2016, but their participation rates declined sharply this time. As reported in the *Financial Times* in January, South Korea has seen a drastically widening ideological gap between young males and females over the past two decades.

While the widening gender gap has been evident in many advanced industrial countries, the difference in South Korea is the most pronounced. In particular, young Korean males have become more conservative than their peers in other countries. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that young males in their twenties oppose President Yoon's impeachment. Although we do not have a complete explanation for why young females in their twenties are more likely to participate in political rallies and demonstrations in support of impeachment, their presence signals a positive development for South Korea's democracy, as these citizens are actively advocating for the protection of democratic values and systems in their daily lives.

**(CHONG)** The role of traditional journalism has been steadily diminishing in South Korea's media environments. Nevertheless, if South Korean society is to avoid further political fragmentation and sustain fact-based democratic discourse, the media must uphold its public responsibility. As Walter Lippman, a prominent journalist and political commentator of the early 20th Century, once argued, the primary function of journalism is to make the citizen more informed. Despite its shortcomings, journalism remains crucial in rendering the unseen world visible to modern citizens.

Platform companies, now a new form of power in the 21st Century, are ultimately driven by profit. As long as user engagement increases, they remain reluctant to regulate sensational or misleading content. Extreme political

influencers thrive on such platforms, gaining both attention and financial rewards. As traditional journalism loses its influence, YouTube influencers have emerged as dominant narrators of reality.

While individuals naturally gravitate toward information that aligns with their political beliefs, the erosion of shared public spaces where diverse perspectives can be engaged is a growing concern. South Korea's fragmented information ecosystem has resulted in diminished exposure to differing viewpoints, reducing opportunities for informed public deliberation.

The media itself bears some responsibility. In a country where most news consumption occurs through portals rather than media websites, news outlets have become reliant on traffic-driven revenue models. Instead of prioritizing high-quality journalism, many have resorted to sensationalist reports on celebrity gossip and viral online trends without proper verification. Furthermore, rather than serving as impartial watchdogs, media organizations now often play an active role in political battles, exacerbating public distrust. A 2022 news audience survey identified media bias as the primary reason South Koreans avoid the news.

Traditional media and journalists in South Korea often argue that even when they invest significant effort in investigative reporting and produce high-quality in-depth journalism, public interest remains minimal. Pursuing factual accuracy demands both time and resources, unlike the easily digestible conspiracy theories commonly found on YouTube, which require little to no verification. Moreover, the multi-faceted nature of fact-based journalism often struggles to compete with the compelling narratives constructed by YouTube influencers who position themselves as navigators of truth. Audiences are drawn to the streamlined, engaging stories on YouTube rather than the complex and nuanced reality presented in rigorous news reports. Journalists experience deep frustration when the public dismisses or even criticizes well-researched investigative work simply because it does not align with their political beliefs. Despite public complaints about media bias, a 2020 comparative study of forty countries found that South Koreans were significantly more likely to consume news that aligned with their views, revealing a lack of openness to opposing perspectives.

South Korean journalism remains constrained by a rigid and mechanical application of objectivity, often defaulting to "he said, she said" reporting, which merely transcribes statements without scrutinizing their veracity. In times of democratic crisis, journalism must move beyond passively relaying public figures' statements to take on the critical responsibility of verifying their factual accuracy. Furthermore, in an environment where breaking news competition is fierce, journalists should not merely flood the public with fragmented information but instead provide contextual explanations to help citizens make sense of overwhelming information streams.

On January 19, 2025, following Yoon's arrest warrant issuance, his supporters stormed the courthouse, vandalizing property and assaulting police officers—an

event reminiscent of the US Capitol riot. Journalists covering the incident were indiscriminately attacked, regardless of their media affiliation or political stance. The assault on democratic institutions, including the judiciary and the press, signals a broader rejection of the democratic system itself, surpassing previous decades of media distrust and polarization.

Compared to 2017, South Korea in 2025 faces a more extreme and divided public sphere, with traditional journalism increasingly marginalized in a platform-dominated ecosystem. Yet, moments of crisis also reaffirm the critical role of fact-based journalism in shaping public deliberation and democratic decision-making. Media organizations must rise above political affiliations and adopt a resolute stance in defending democracy against unconstitutional threats. Journalism must facilitate a public sphere where facts—not extremist rhetoric—form the foundation of civic engagement. Citizens, in turn, must recognize journalism's indispensable role in preserving democracy, supporting and protecting fact-based reporting in the face of mounting political pressure.

**(LEEM) Finally, let us briefly discuss the impeachment crisis that has been unfolding since President Yoon's declaration of martial law on December 3 of last year. This impeachment conjuncture is evolving in a markedly different manner from the previous impeachment of President Park Geun-hye. This time, antagonistic polarization among political forces is intensifying even further, significantly amplifying political uncertainty moving forward. What are the key features and dynamics of the current conjuncture?**

**(KIM)** The current political situation in South Korea, following President Yoon's declaration of martial law and subsequent impeachment, differs markedly from the circumstances surrounding the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye in terms of the intensity of both the constitutional crisis and political uncertainty. In light of the current situation, characterizing the events of 2017 as a "crisis" may now seem somewhat overstated. The constitutional procedures were duly followed: the National Assembly passed the motion to impeach the president, the Constitutional Court deliberated and delivered its verdict, and a presidential election was conducted in an orderly manner, resulting in the election of President Moon Jae-in. During that period, public opinion overwhelmingly and consistently supported Park's removal from office, and the political establishment, by and large, aligned with public sentiment. While Park retained a core base of loyal supporters, they lacked the political momentum to alter the course of events.

In contrast, the months following President Yoon's unconstitutional declaration of martial law and his impeachment have unfolded under considerably more volatile conditions. The ruling People Power Party has refused to take a firm stance against the president's unconstitutional actions, instead signaling solidarity

with his hardline base. Public opinion polls have consistently indicated that approximately 25-30 percent of the population oppose Yoon's removal from office.

A significant driver of this sentiment appears to be a deep-seated hostility toward the Democratic Party leader, Lee Jae-myung. Unlike Moon Jae-in in 2017, Lee in 2025 is an undeniably more polarizing political figure. Nevertheless, it is striking that over a quarter of Korean citizens appear willing to tolerate such gross constitutional and legal violations simply to oppose a particular political figure. It suggests that a substantial portion of the population perceives the ascent of a disliked political adversary as a greater threat than the breakdown of constitutional democracy itself.

This development calls into question whether there has ever truly been a foundational political consensus in South Korea's democratic system since the democratization of 1987. It is in this context that the concept of the "far-right," which has been rather scarcely used in South Korean political discourse, is now emerging with renewed clarity. What is now visible is a willingness to suspend democratic norms to prevent the electoral success of a detested political opponent, and a growing acceptance of violence to incapacitate individuals or institutions perceived as obstacles.

A vivid case occurred in the early hours of January 19, 2025, when hundreds of President Yoon's supporters violently stormed the Seoul Western District Court in protest of a judicial hearing regarding his arrest warrant. Conspiratorial narratives—such as those surrounding alleged electoral fraud or claims of state capture by hostile forces, often tied to anti-China rhetoric—are also gaining ground. Conservative evangelical groups have played a notable role in these dynamics, a subject that warrants a deeper inquiry. Particularly alarming is that such extremist rhetoric has not been limited to the fringes but has been echoed and amplified by some of the prominent figures within the ruling party.

These developments suggest that the current crisis cannot be adequately described as a mere symptom of polarization. What is at stake is the erosion of the foundational norms of democratic constitutionalism itself. While these anti-democratic impulses are presently most visible among the most ardent supports of Yoon and the People Power Party, it remains to be seen whether similar tendencies would emerge within the supports of the Democratic Party, should the political conditions shift.

Given all this, I think we would have to conclude that South Korea has not learned very much from the political turmoil during and after the impeachment of President Park in 2017. The roots of the current crisis are both wide and deep. As other participants in this dialogue have rightly noted, the unique configuration of South Korea's political institutions has undoubtedly contributed to the intensification of political polarization. However, a narrow focus on institutional factors—such as partisan turnover, executive-legislative relations, or the party system—fails to capture the full depth of the current democratic crisis. The rise

of political extremism, the judicialization of politics and the politicization of the judiciary, the weak democratic commitment of senior public officials, the distortion of the informational ecosystem, and the spread of political hatred and exclusion all point to deeper and more systemic problems.

The term constitution typically refers to the supreme law of a state—the foundational document that establishes and regulates the principles by which political authority is structured and exercised. However, constitution also means the physical or psychological makeup of an individual or group—their "disposition" or "condition." In this broader sense, constitution encompasses the norms, customs, and habits that guide institutions and political actors of a given polity. Recognizing this dual meaning underscores the need to broaden the scope of discussions about the restoration of Korean democracy. Institutional reforms, including constitutional amendments, are undoubtedly important. But equally essential is a thorough examination of the deeper cultural and structural forces that shape the political constitution—or democratic character—of Korean society.

**(LEEM)** As the editor, I would like to once again extend my sincere gratitude to the experts who have shared their valuable analyses and insights for this special dialogue. The circumstances surrounding President Yoon's declaration of martial law, the subsequent impeachment process, and the forthcoming presidential election undoubtedly warrant thorough investigation. Once the situation stabilizes, I hope to offer readers of the *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding* a similarly structured analysis on the resilience of South Korea's democracy through close collaboration between the journal and the Democracy Cluster of the Institute for Future Studies at Seoul National University.

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