

SOUTH KOREA: With martial law declaration, Yoon likely hastens own departure

President Yoon Suk-yeol's declaration of martial law in a late-night television address on 3 December was a black-swan event. Tensions had been building across the political spectrum in recent weeks, including separate scandals related to opposition Democratic Party leader Lee Jae-myung and President Yoon's wife Kim Keon-hee. Yet the sudden imposition of martial law, which has not been used for more than forty years, was a shocking development. The immediate impact was the suspension of the National Assembly, with military forces arriving to secure the parliament building.

The trigger for this drastic step remains unclear. In his speech, President Yoon cited threats from pro-North Korea and anti-state forces to the constitution and the freedom and happiness of the Korean people. The immediate context was that the National Assembly had just imposed massive cuts on Yoon's planned 2025 budget, and there were rumors that the opposition party and anti-Yoon factions were planning large protests and candlelight vigils in December to call for his impeachment.

Ironically, by declaring martial law, President Yoon may have accelerated his own downfall. Massive public demonstrations outside the National Assembly building now seem likely, reminiscent of those in December 2016 before the impeachment of then-president Park Geun-hye. Yoon's move has likely created the momentum for his own impeachment and removal from office, only halfway through his single five-year term.

While this is a political crisis, democracy still holds in South Korea and the country's institutions look resilient. Despite the military presence, around 190 of the 300 lawmakers managed to gather in the chamber (including 18 from Yoon's own People Power Party) and voted unanimously to reject the declaration and call for the president to lift it. At time of writing, the lawmakers reportedly remain in the chamber to prevent its closure although troops have departed. The education ministry announced that schools would open as normal on 4 December, while the Bank of Korea plans to hold an emergency meeting in the morning to respond to the developments and the won's rapid depreciation against the dollar.

Meanwhile, Washington is treading carefully amid the delicate situation, calling for a peaceful resolution to any political disputes. Yoon has vigorously pursued stronger relations with the US since taking office in May 2022, with the April 2023 State Visit representing a modern high point in bilateral ties and the August 2023 Camp David frameworks breaking new ground in the trilateral relationships with Japan. The upcoming US presidential transition had already introduced fresh uncertainty into the [outlook for the US-ROK relationship](#), and the latest developments in Seoul only add to that uncertainty.

A key issue to watch is whether Yoon lifts the declaration at daybreak, local time. If not, it would create a degree of constitutional crisis. The president would have to decide whether to violate the constitution and defy the legislature's bipartisan decision, and the military would have to choose whether to defy the commander-in-chief. Another important signpost will be the U.S. response. Yoon is highly regarded throughout Washington for his Camp David achievements, stance as a China hawk, policies on semiconductors, and support for Ukraine. However, Washington would want to avoid potential damage to U.S. interests.

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