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South Korea

# South Korea's Conservatives Are Trying to Cling to Power

- IV Online magazine - 2025 - IVP - January 2025 -

Publication date: Tuesday 21 January 2025

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**South Korea's right-wing president, Yoon Suk-yeol, has finally been arrested after his attempt to stage a coup. But Yoon's supporters are still mobilizing aggressively, hoping that Donald Trump will take their side over false claims of electoral fraud.**

On January 15, law enforcement officials finally arrested Yoon Suk-yeol, South Korea's impeached far-right president, for plotting an insurrection in the form of an attempt to impose martial law late last year. This came twelve days after a humiliating failed attempt by an anti-corruption agency to capture Yoon, who had been holed up in his presidential residence in southern Seoul.

The scene, livestreamed on YouTube, was nothing short of spectacular, with more than 1,200 elite detectives trained in martial arts and the control of felons storming the residence in their predawn raid. This time, soldiers and many of Yoon's security detail members chose to stay in their barracks instead of forming human shields as they had during the previous attempt.

Under South Korean law, the Corruption Investigation Office for High-ranking Officials (CIO) can hold Yoon for forty-eight hours before it seeks a detention warrant. Given the gravity of his crime, punishable by life imprisonment or even death, and the country's stringent bail practices, the sitting president-turned-coup-ringleader will likely remain behind bars until his sentencing.

## Yoon's Defiance

However, Yoon still emerged defiant and even stronger once outside his fortified residence, from which he had spent the previous month riling up his base and sapping his legislative opposition. In the latest Gallup Korea poll of 1,004 adults aged eighteen and over, conducted last week, only 64 percent supported Yoon's impeachment, down 11 percentage points from an earlier survey conducted ahead of a National Assembly vote to impeach him. Yoon's People Power Party surged to 34 percent support, almost neck and neck with the Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) at 36 percent. The DPK currently has a majority of seats in the assembly.

Public fatigue amid rising cost-of-living expenses and political instability appears to be one factor in Yoon's turnaround. The postcoup turns and twists have undermined earlier feelings of optimism that South Korea's masses will smoothly navigate the toughest stress test for democracy since the late 1980s, when they freed themselves from the grip of military dictatorship. The last month and a half have shown the coup was not an aberration in the country's young but resilient democracy, but rather the result of profound contradictions and fragilities long embedded in that system.

The country is now governed by Choi Sang-mok, the deputy prime minister for economic affairs, who is simultaneously serving as acting prime minister and acting president, having replaced Han Duck-soo. Han, the former prime minister, was impeached after calling for a bipartisan compromise over candidates to fill three vacancies at the nine-seat Constitutional Court, the highest judicial body, which is set to rule on Yoon's impeachment. Choi has since appointed two of the three candidates endorsed by the DPK-controlled National Assembly to the court, with at least six votes from the judges required to approve the impeachment.

If Yoon could barricade himself for more than a month in his hilltop residence overlooking Seoul, it was not merely

because he was at first surrounded by more than two hundred security guards who loyally followed orders before later defying the commands of their superiors and abandoning their positions. It was also because the former prosecutor general could contest the validity of his arrest warrant, citing the CIO's lack of legal authority to investigate allegations of insurrection.

Formed just four years ago in a move to curb the overreach of the prosecution service, the office has an incomplete mandate and is ill-equipped for a case as significant as a failed coup. The DPK has been pushing for the National Assembly to appoint a special counsel. In the meantime, the CIO has little option but to turn to the police and the prosecution service — Yoon's former stronghold — for the investigation. This exposes the institutional vulnerability that Yoon will attempt to exploit so he can get off the hook on a technicality.

## The Coup Plan

There is a sealed eighty-three-page indictment against Kim Yong-hyun, Yoon's defense minister, now in detention, a copy of which I obtained through a lawmaker. According to the indictment, the coup plot began brewing in August 2024, when Yoon promoted his security chief Kim, whom he had known since their days in high school, to the position of defense minister in a rare personnel shift.

Kim orchestrated the plot alongside commanders of two military intelligence agencies, putting together a crack force of about 1,500 elite soldiers from these agencies, special warfare brigades, and a corps tasked with guarding Seoul. Yoon planned to dissolve the National Assembly and replace it with his own rubber-stamp legislative body, the indictment contends.

However, this attempt to subvert the basic democratic order quickly backfired, with thousands of ordinary citizens converging at the National Assembly to block soldiers from occupying it. Mobilized without prior knowledge of the gravity of their mission, soldiers also balked at carrying out the order.

An impatient Yoon called the officer on the scene twice, ordering him to blow up the doors of the assembly hall and yank lawmakers out of it before they could rescind the martial law imposition. As the situation worsened, a desperate Yoon urged the officer to arrest three legislative leaders, including the head of his own PPP and his former right-hand man, instead of the initially targeted fourteen.

The plot took yet another twist with the involvement of Noh Sang-won, who had rebranded himself as a psychic in 2017 after being dishonorably discharged as army intelligence commander for sexually assaulting a female officer. Noh was tapped to lead a task force investigating the National Election Commission. Yoon purported to believe that agents of North Korea and/or China hacked the commission's servers to manipulate the tally of last year's general election, securing a solid majority for the DPK.

On the night of the coup, military intelligence agents attempted to arrest key personnel and to seize the servers before the overturning of martial law. According to the indictment, they were on the verge of blindfolding and abducting election officials to a black site in an underground bunker, where Noh and his henchmen were planning to torture them into making confessions.

In reality, electoral manipulation through server hacking is out of the question, as South Korea still manually counts the votes — not once, but twice — while maintaining a solid paper trail at each critical juncture. Over the years, the country has made its electoral system watertight in order to break with the authoritarian past, when dictators regularly

manipulated the system to perpetuate their rule.

This did not stop far-right conspiracy theorists, who spread rumors of electoral fraud through social media platforms. It is unclear how much Yoon really became convinced of the truth of this conspiracy theory. Whether or not he truly believed such claims, he used them to justify an attempt to overthrow democracy and bring back the practice of torture.

In the course of resisting arrest, Yoon has repeatedly propagated the election conspiracy theory to rally his supporters, who daily mounted anti-impeachment protests at his residence, defying the cold snap and blizzards. In a rare occurrence for the far right, they have often come close to matching anti-Yoon crowds in both size and intensity.

## MAGA-fication of Korea's Right

The rise of the far right has further pushed the conservative PPP to the right, with a new hard-line leadership evicting a more moderate team. The new leadership is now calling on pro-impeachment lawmakers to leave the party. This in turn has emboldened the far right on the streets, some of whom have formed vigilante units named after the White Skull Squad — a violent plainclothes arrest squad from the dictatorship era, known for their white helmets, which waded deep into protests to brutalize and arrest demonstrators.

In the lead-up to Yoon's arrest, the far right received a noticeable boost from young males joining in their rallies, in stark contrast to the pro-impeachment protests that were predominantly populated by women in their twenties and thirties. Yoon also took notice of this development in a recorded statement before the arrest: "Our youths have become aware of the importance of liberal democracy again and exhibited their passion for it."

It was the support of young men three years ago that catapulted Yoon to the presidency by a razor-thin margin of 0.73 percent. Yoon leaned heavily on a misogynistic platform, tapping into the frustrations of male youth who believe they have been unfairly falling behind their female rivals in Korea's notoriously competitive job market. This perception is at odds with reality. As of 2023, South Korea has the widest gender pay gap among countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, with women earning about 69 percent of the average male wage.

It is true that women have benefited from a South Korean equivalent of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), often at the expense of male perceptions of status loss. In this context, compulsory military service can typify male grievances: all able-bodied men in their twenties are drafted into the military for eighteen months, without the benefits of labor market preferences that are granted to draftees in other countries, some of which also subject women to compulsory service. But the crux of the problem stems from South Korea's ruthless form of capitalism that takes no prisoners in pitting working men and women against one another, as attested by the country's plunging birth rate of 0.72 percent, the lowest in the world.

Young men are drawn to the far right because they feel both the liberals and the Left have failed them. Men and women alike often see the DPK as a bunch of hypocrites who have little to offer in terms of gender or labor issues. During the heyday of the global Me Too movement, one of the DPK's two presidential hopefuls ended his own life after being accused of sexual harassment, while the other was incarcerated for sexual misconduct.

This paved the way for the rise of the party's current presidential front-runner Lee Jae-myung, who is embroiled in a series of financial and electoral scandals. Meanwhile, South Korea's left parties have yet to offer a meaningful policy

framework or campaign capable of addressing gender and class issues comprehensively.

# Trump to the Rescue?

The MAGA slogan “Stop the Steal” has become a staple at Korean far-right rallies. Protesters are wagering that Donald Trump will come to Yoon’s rescue, believing that the incoming US president also fell victim to election fraud four years earlier. Historically, the country’s far right is in close contact with its US counterpart.

These ties, initially forged through evangelical churches and military connections, were further solidified in 2019 with the formation of the Korean Conservative Political Action Conference (KCPAC) as an official partner with the US CPAC. The KCPAC has since injected MAGA ideas into the Korean far right. Matt Schlapp, chairman of the American Conservative Union, a prominent MAGA advocate and close friend of KCPAC founder Annie Chan, was the first (and to date only) American to meet with Yoon since his impeachment.

This quiet maneuvering should alarm the DPK and its leader, Lee Jae-myung. Paradoxically, some liberals — and even some left-wing nationalists — pinned their hopes on a Trump win, believing that he would resume direct talks with North Korea’s Kim Jong-un for a denuclearized Korean peninsula, making the ignorant assumption that peace on the peninsula can come at the expense of democratic rights in the United States. If such talks were to take place again, both the US and North Korea would sideline the South, since neither would see the need for an intermediary.

The Trump administration would likely prefer a far-right president to succeed Yoon, since they would be more compliant with his strategic stance against China than a liberal who might attempt to strike a delicate balance between the United States and China. We can find echoes of this thinking in a report published by the Congressional Research Service after the coup. The report noted Yoon’s “greater willingness than prior ROK leaders to publicly criticize China’s actions,” contrasting this with “DP leader Lee, who has questioned this approach.”

The conservatives are docile toward the United States while the liberals lack clarity and resoluteness. The DPK’s attempt to counterbalance US influence is bound to fail unless it takes a fundamentally radical stance. South Korea hosts the largest overseas US base, Camp Humphreys, which is strategically located closer to Shanghai or Beijing than Taipei.

For its part, China has been attempting, often clumsily, to pull this pivotal state away from its pro-US alignment. In June 2023, during a meeting with the DPK’s Lee, the Chinese ambassador to Seoul, Xing Haiming, abruptly pulled a note from his pocket, openly criticizing South Korea for “betting on the US’s win and China’s loss.” Lee remained silent in the face of Xing’s out-of-protocol rudeness.

Government officials from Washington and Beijing clashed over two versions of the impeachment motion against Yoon following the coup. The first version, which failed to reach a quorum due to a boycott by the PPP, accused Yoon of undermining peace on the peninsula through his trilateral alliance with the United States and Japan against North Korea, China, and Russia.

The US protested the motion, arguing that it unduly condemned the alliance. The second version, which omitted the criticism of the trilateral alliance, passed with the help of twelve rebel votes from the PPP. The omission in turn sparked protests from China.

## What Next?

Since the coup, each week in South Korea has been full of dramatic developments. Few expected a resurgence of the far right and the possibility of the PPP's rebound. Disappointment was palpable when the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), the country's largest independent union federation, called off a national strike. Yet hope is rekindling as organized labor has begun to play a larger role than it did eight years ago during the similar wave of protests that led to President Park Geun-hye's impeachment.

Back then, the DPK-controlled rallies often did not allow labor leaders to speak from the platform, although individual labor unionists were critical in keeping momentum going. This time, the landscape is shifting. Many unions joined the rallies as contingents, offering their services to demonstrators.

The 190,000-strong Korea Metal Workers' Union, whose collective bargaining contract already includes LGBTQ protections, expressed solidarity with LGBTQ protesters, flying a rainbow-themed union flag. Moves like these are piquing interest in organized labor among young protesters, many of whom are attending political rallies for the first time.

Yoon has probably now gone from the stage, but the system that produced him still endures. The country's immediate future hinges on how organized labor and the Left will incorporate this new generation of protesters into their own agenda, building a broad movement capable of challenging the antidemocratic forces and their international allies attempting to resuscitate the ancient regime.

17 January 2025

Source: [Jacobin](#).

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