

SOUTH KOREA: Yoon steps back from the brink, but deep uncertainty continues

After a sleepless night in Seoul, President Yoon Suk-yeol returned to the airwaves before dawn to announce the lifting of the [martial law](#) he had imposed late the previous evening. The cabinet gathered shortly thereafter and confirmed the decision. Troops returned to barracks, and barriers were removed from the National Assembly building. The move will ease heightened political tensions and defuse a potential constitutional crisis, but Yoon now finds himself in a precarious situation.

The martial law declaration may have been intended to signal to the opposition that a ‘nuclear option’ exists to bypass severe legislative frictions and shock them into cooperating to pass Yoon’s budget and other elements of his policy agenda. If so, the effect will likely be the reverse, causing the opposition to double down against the president.

The key question now is whether Yoon will be successfully impeached and removed for his conduct. It seems that dozens of Democratic Party (DP) legislators are preparing to move an impeachment bill as early as 4 December, local time. The DP by itself lacks the two-thirds supermajority needed for impeachment in the 300-seat legislature, but it could reach the threshold if it secures the support of all the breakaway or independent legislators plus ten members of Yoon’s own People Power Party—17 of whom participated in the unanimous 190-member vote against the martial law declaration.

The impeachment will still be a challenging task, though not an impossible one. Public opinion will play a crucial role. Yoon’s approval ratings have been in the 20% range recently but could now fall to single digits. If public opinion turns sharply against Yoon and if the National Assembly does not vote to remove him, mass demonstrations could become a daily occurrence in Seoul, as seen during the Park Geun-hye impeachment crisis in December 2016.

For Washington—which was reportedly blindsided by Yoon’s actions—the situation will continue to be a significant concern. Political stability in South Korea is vital, given the potential for negative impact across semiconductor supply chains, relations with North Korea, US-ROK-Japan ties, and support for Taiwan and Ukraine, among other areas. There is also an element of reputational risk for the current administration, given that South Korea—and Yoon himself—are intricately tied to many of the administration’s major foreign policy achievements in Asia.

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