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Politics

Martial Law in South Korea: What to Know and Why K-pop Fans Were Raising Concerns

The last time a president declared martial law in South Korea was in 1980.



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DECEMBER 4, 2024

Within the span of a chaotic six hours, South Korea saw its president declare emergency martial law, be denounced by his **own conservative party leader**, then withdraw his announcement, leaving the nation reeling.

The **last time** a president declared martial law in South Korea was in 1980, seven years before the country became a democracy.

South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol first broke the news in an unannounced **press conference** late Tuesday evening (KST), accusing the National Assembly of engaging in “legislative dictatorship,” according to a translated transcript from *Korea JoongAng Daily*.

“My fellow citizens, I declare martial law to protect the Republic of Korea from the threats of North Korean communist forces, to immediately eradicate the unscrupulous pro-Pyongyang antistate forces that pillage the freedom and happiness of our people and to protect free constitutional order,” he said.

Yoon’s popularity has been at an all-time low, with his approval rating falling to a record 17% in November, according to a **Gallup Korea poll**.

Hours after his press conference ended, South Korea’s National Assembly voted to lift Yoon’s martial law. The president’s actions were **decried by his own conservative party leader Han Dong-hoon**, who said in a statement, “As the ruling party, we feel deeply sorry to the public. The president must directly and thoroughly explain this tragic situation.”

Early Wednesday morning (KST), Yoon said he would lift martial law and withdraw the armed forces. The presidential **chief of staff and Yoon’s senior secretaries have resigned**, but the damage has been done. Citizens are furious and demanding Yoon be **impeached**, according to the *Korea Herald*.

Why was martial law declared?

In his declaration of martial law, Yoon pointed to "antistate forces" and alluded to threats from North Korea. Article 77 of the **South Korean constitution** states that martial law may be utilized "when it is required to cope with a military necessity or to maintain the public safety and order by mobilization of the military forces in time of war, armed conflict, or similar national emergency."

But members of Yoon's own party, the National Assembly, and the majority of the Korean population weren't buying it.

How did South Korean lawmakers respond?

Lawmakers were quick to denounce Yoon's actions. Ahn Gwi-ryeong, a former television news anchor and the Seoul Dobong-gu regional chairwoman for the Democratic Party of Korea, Yoon's main opposition party, reportedly has been vocal about the need to investigate Yoon and his wife, who was filmed on hidden camera appearing to accept a lavish designer gift. Ahn went viral on Tuesday when she was filmed arguing with armed soldiers who were trying to infiltrate the National Assembly, where politicians were voting to end martial law. She can be heard shouting at the soldiers, "**Aren't you ashamed of yourselves?**"

To circumvent the soldiers who were blocking the entrance into parliament, Democratic Party leader **Lee Jae-myung livestreamed himself** climbing over the walls to get inside to vote against martial law. Lee said in Korean, "The economy of the Republic of Korea will collapse irretrievably. My fellow citizens, please come to the National Assembly."

Al Jazeera **reported** that the floor leader of the Democratic Party, Park Chan-dea, said Yoon wouldn't be able to avoid treason charges for his actions.

The last South Korean president to be impeached was South Korea's first female president, Park Geun-hye, who was formally removed from office in 2017. She is the daughter of former president Park Chung-hee, a dictator who served five consecutive terms until he was assassinated in 1979.

When did South Korea become a democracy?

Though South Korea is known as a democratic nation, this wasn't the case a century ago. Before the Korean peninsula was split into North and South, the then-unified country was colonized by Japan from 1910 to 1945. Japan surrendered to the Allies in 1945, but Korea still wasn't free. Unable to agree on a unified Korean government, the world's most powerful allies (the United States and the Soviet Union) split the country. The US occupied the Republic of Korea (in the South) while the Soviets did the same in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea).

In 1948, **Syngman Rhee** was elected president by members of the National Assembly. He oversaw an authoritarian government that included the massacres of protestors. Two years later, North Korea (with the backing of China and the Soviet Union) invaded South Korea (supported by the US). Though combat ended with the signing of an armistice agreement on July 27, 1953, neither side signed a peace treaty. Therefore, the Korean War never technically ended.

Strongman leadership and military dictatorship in South Korea didn't end until the country's constitution was revised in 1987. Roh Tae-woo became the first president of South Korea to be elected by direct popular vote.

How are Koreans reacting?

Korean citizens were alarmed and outraged by the declaration of martial law. Many still remember the student-led Gwangju Uprising of 1980, when protestors died in a violent military crackdown. Students and others demonstrating against the government at Chonnam National University were reportedly **shot, battered, raped, and tortured** by the South Korean military. Some estimate the **death toll** at more than 1,000.

Just three months ago, South Korean pundits were arguing about the unlikelihood of a military coup ever taking place in their country again. "A fierce debate revolves around allegations that the Yoon Suk Yeol administration is preparing for martial law," Wang Son-taek, an adjunct professor at Sogang University, **wrote in an essay** for the *Korea Herald* in September. "The opposition has raised suspicions, claiming that the

government's recent actions suggest preparations for martial law... In a high-level democracy like South Korea, could a president realistically pursue martial law, which is tantamount to a palace coup? Simply put, it is almost impossible.”

Why are K-pop fans speaking out about the news?

K-pop fans tend to keep up with everything going on in South Korea, particularly developments that could impact the country’s music industry. While some were worried about the potential safety of enlisted idols — including members of BTS, Monsta X, and EXO — there were also reports that festivals, promotional events, and televised appearances were being **anceled** following the declaration of martial law.

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