



RCAS Commentary

From Impeachment to Instability: Can South Korea Safeguard its Democracy?

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December 19, 2024

About RCAS

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RCAS aims to become a leading research institute and think tank on Asian affairs in the Indo-Pacific region. To date, RCAS has conducted research programs on maritime disputes in the South China Sea (SCS), China's relations with the Indo-Pacific states, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), terrorism/counterterrorism in the Afg-Pak region, and so on. It is committed to promoting maritime cooperation, regional integration, and regional peace in the Indo-Pacific region at large.

RCAS has published nearly ten books in Chinese and English and more than 20 papers in SSCI/SCOPUS/CSSCI-indexed journals. Recent English publications include *Populism, Nationalism and South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2022); *Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Contemporary Developments and Dynamics* (London: Routledge, 2022); *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *The Reshaping of China-Southeast Asia Relations in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *Territorial Disputes, The Role of Leaders and The Impact of Quad: A Triangular Explanation of China-India Border Escalations* (2023); *Managing the South China Sea Dispute: Multilateral and Bilateral Approaches* (2022); *China-Pakistan Cooperation on Afghanistan: Assessing Key Interests and Implementing Strategies* (2022); *Hedging Against the Dragon: Myanmar's Tangled Relations with China since 1988* (2021); and *China-Pakistan Conventional Arms Trade: An Appraisal of Supplier's and Recipient's Motives* (2020).

RCAS has also published hundreds of articles, and its researchers have been interviewed in various local and international media outlets, such as *The Diplomat* in the United States, *East Asian Forum (EAF)* in Australia, *Bangkok Post* in Thailand, *Jakarta Post* in Indonesia, *Lian He Zao Bao*, *Think China* in Singapore, *South China Morning Post (SCMP)*, *China-US Focus* in Hong Kong, *CGTN*, *Global Times*, *World Affairs* in China. RCAS researchers have actively participated in international conferences or study visits in the United States, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, Cambodia, and other places.

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South Korea is a politically prosperous country in East Asia, known for its democratic institutions and stable political environment. However, the country has recently faced a domestic political crisis. The impeachment motion against the president and the ongoing debate has exposed the deep crisis in the democratic system. The country is facing a stern test of democracy with the impeachment of President *Yoon Suk Yeol*.



▲ Protesters take part in a rally calling for the impeachment of South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol, who declared martial law, which was reversed hours later, in Seoul, South Korea, December 13, 2024.

President Yoon recently declared martial law to counter anti-government forces and North Korean threats. The decision has caused deep concern among the country's people and the international community. The current president of South Korea has been accused of abuse of power, bribery, and violation of democratic values. The opposition and civil society have long complained that the presidential administration lacked transparency and accountability.

In 2017, Park Geun-hye was impeached on corruption charges. Millions of people took to the streets to protest for democracy. The current situation is essentially a

repeat of that time. Martial law was imposed in South Korea for the first time since the introduction of parliamentary democracy in 1987. President Yoon's decision to impose martial law brought back old meYoon, who had experienced military rule during the Park Chung-hee regime in 1979.

In a televised address to the nation, President Yoon said the move was taken to protect South Korea from anti-government forces. However, the people and the Parliament considered the move arbitrary and undemocratic. Hours after martial law was enacted, South Korea's National Assembly took action against it. Two hundred four Korea's 300-member Parliament voted to impeach President Yoon. On the contrary, 85 members opposed it. In addition, three lawmakers were absent from the House, and eight votes were declared invalid.

This vote reflects the country's people's commitment to democratic practices and the country's people's resistance to military rule. After a majority of lawmakers backed impeachment in Parliament, the fate of President Yoon Suk-yeol will now be decided by the South's Constitutional Court. The country's court will resubmit South Yun's dismissal within the country's months. The president must step down for good if the Judiciary Council votes favour impeachment. If Yoon is removed from the presidency, the country will have to hold elections in two months to elect a new president.

As a result of the impeachment, President Yoon lost executive powers, and Prime Minister Han Dak Soo served as acting president. The foundations of democracy are transparency, accountability, and justice. However, democracy has been negatively affected by the power struggle between political parties and the spread of misinformation during the impeachment process against the president. This has eroded public confidence in political institutions and created a deep social divide.

The current political situation in South Korea carries an important signal for the country's democratic system. The imposition of martial law and the president's impeachment of the country has raised questions about the strength and sustainability of democratic institutions. The court will decide on his removal or reinstatement within six months.

The situation in South Korea has sparked a widespread reaction in the international community. Major international powers, including the United States, the United Kingdom, the European Union, and India, have expressed concern. The United States is a longstanding ally and strategic partner of South Korea. The United States has stressed safeguarding South Korea's democratic stability. The US Congress has discussed the issue in detail and expressed its support for South Korea's constitutional process. Britain has expressed deeKorea'srn over South Korea's impeachment. On the other hand, the European Union has expressed its support for democracy in South Korea. European Parliament adopted a resolution to protect Korean democracy.

Resolving South Korea's political crisis requires a clear and precise vision. Korea is important to ensure transparency and follow the constitutional process when investigating allegations against the president. At the same time, political parties must go beyond competing for power and act in the national interest. The future of South Korean democracy largely depends on the decision of the Constitutional Court. If the court removes President Yoon, it will be a victory for democracy.

However, if President Yoon remains in office, it could have long-term effects on democratic institutions. The current political crisis in South Korea is an instructive example for the country and the Asian democracies. People's confidence in democracy and their firm stand is People's way out of this crisis. If the South Korean people and their institutions succeed in dealing with this crisis, it will be considered a milestone in the country's democratic history.

This crisis is a political phenomenon and a challenge to the stability and future of the country's democratic institutions. South Korean people and country leaders should learn from this crisis and strengthen democratic values.

This article was first published at Press Xpress, United Arab Emirates, December 19, 2024,

<https://pressxpress.org/2024/12/19/from-impeachment-to-instability-can-south-korea-safeguard-its-democracy/>.

About Author



Sujit Kumar Datta is Deputy Director, Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS), Hong Kong, and the former Chairman and Professor in the International Relations Department at the University of Chittagong, Bangladesh. Dr. Datta graduated with a BA (Honors) and MA degree in International Relations from the Jahangirnagar University and completed his PhD in International Politics from the School of Political Science and Public Administration, Shandong University, China. After that, he had worked at the BRAC Training Division (BTD) as a faculty member. He had joined in the department of International Relations, University of Chittagong, Bangladesh as a Lecturer in January, 2010. Dr. Datta has authored several articles and book chapters in renowned national and international peer-reviewed journals (Web of Science, Scopus indexed).