

## **The fundamental solution rests on political reform**

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Korea has often celebrated its achievements: being one of the 10 largest economies, the global influence of K-culture, advanced K-reactor technology, robust K-defense and its position as the world's 10th-largest donor country. Yet, President Yoon Suk Yeol's abrupt declaration of martial law on Dec. 3 starkly exposed the fragility of the political foundation underpinning these accomplishments. A single ill-judged act by an autocratic leader revealed the vulnerability of these hard-won merits. Given the gravity of undermining democratic freedoms in the name of championing them, Yoon's impeachment and removal from office seem inevitable. But if we wish to prevent such political crises in the future, we must reflect deeply on why they recur so frequently.

Yoon, a prosecutor-turned-president, could not break free from the black-and-white worldview characteristic of his former profession. He relied on a narrow circle of appointees, silenced dissent within his administration and blurred the lines between public duty and private life. Most critically, he failed to exhibit political leadership that fosters unity through dialogue and compromise. Perhaps, from his prosecutorial perspective, he never felt the need for such leadership. The consequences were evident in repeated electoral defeats for the ruling People Power Party (PPP).

Even as public sentiment increasingly turned against him, Yoon ignored the signs. This culminated in the PPP's overwhelming loss in the April 10 parliamentary elections. That moment should have been a turning point for the president to radically reform his governance style. He needed to reconnect with the public, explain his policies more transparently and address the scandals surrounding his wife with contrition. Instead, Yoon alienated the people further with his abrupt martial law declaration, turning them into adversaries.

The underlying issue lies in South Korea's political system, which has failed to screen out leaders prone to such authoritarian tendencies. The 1987 constitutional amendment, which introduced the current single-term, five-year presidency, has outlived its effectiveness. In the four decades since democratization, four presidents have been imprisoned, one committed suicide and two were impeached. How much longer can this flawed system persist?

Under the single-term presidency, South Korean presidents wield near-imperial power. Although the prime minister is nominally responsible for government administration, they lack genuine authority. The National Assembly is similarly dominated by two major parties, which captured over 90 percent of legislative seats in the 2020 elections despite earning just two-thirds of the popular vote. This leaves a third of the electorate without meaningful representation. Furthermore, a razor-thin presidential victory — such as Yoon’s margin of just 0.73 percentage points — grants the winner unchecked control over state resources and power.

This antiquated system has revealed numerous shortcomings. Chief among them is the relentless power struggle between the ruling and opposition parties under a winner-takes-all framework. Neither party prioritizes the needs of the people or the nation’s long-term interests. Instead, opposition parties reflexively reject even rational policies from the government, fearing that successful governance might bolster the ruling party’s electoral prospects.

This dynamic has led to a cycle of policy reversals whenever power changes hands. For example, the liberal Roh Moo-hyun administration’s balanced regional development policy was discarded by the subsequent conservative Lee Myung-bak administration. Similarly, Lee’s green growth initiative was abandoned by his successor, Park Geun-hye. Had Park refined and expanded this policy, South Korea could have become a global leader in environmental sustainability. Instead, these policy about-turns have caused widespread inefficiency and instability. Foreign policy and North Korea policies have also swung dramatically, eroding international credibility. Economically, the nation faces a long-term recession, with growth stagnating in the 1 percent range and the birthrate sitting at 0.72 percent. Meanwhile, political parties remain preoccupied with wielding legislative power rather than addressing these systemic challenges.

It is time to establish a new mechanism for electing lawmakers and holding them accountable. Most urgently, South Korea must replace the single-term presidency. This system, repeatedly shaken by the missteps of individual presidents, has proved untenable. Constitutional reform should aim to empower the president to focus on foreign policy while delegating domestic governance to a prime minister.

The ongoing crisis will not end with Yoon’s impeachment. Without a fundamental overhaul of the political system, similar crises will continue to occur. Politicians must not ignore the public’s growing demand for meaningful reform. True respect for democratic values lies in responding to this call and delivering a political system capable of ensuring stability, accountability and progress.

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