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The South Korean coup attempt and the global attack on democratic rights

The abortive attempt by South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol to impose martial law on the night of December 3–4 has stripped the veil off what is routinely described as a “flourishing Asian democracy,” revealing the autocratic foundations of the South Korean state.



People demanding that South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol step down gather in front of the National Assembly in Seoul, South Korea, Wednesday, Dec. 4, 2024. [AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon]

The attempted military coup is a warning, not only to workers in South Korea but internationally, that the ruling classes around the world are driven to dictatorial methods to impose their agenda of war and austerity.

Yoon issued the martial law decree late Tuesday night, denouncing the opposition Democratic Party as North Korean sympathisers and agents for emasculating his budget and driving the country “into the abyss of national ruin.” The military regime overseen by army

general Park An-soo immediately banned all political activities and strikes, imposed blanket censorship, authorised arrests without warrants, and ordered striking doctors back to work.

Thousands gathered around the National Assembly building in Seoul, where troops and police attempted and failed to prevent the convening of the parliament and arrest the speaker, the leaders of the opposition Democratic Party (DP) and Yoon's own People Power Party (PPP). The assembly, where the DP holds a majority of seats, met and with the support of PPP members present unanimously agreed to demand the lifting of martial law.

For hours, Yoon prevaricated. To proceed meant to breach the constitutional requirement to lift martial law on a majority vote by the National Assembly. The overriding consideration, however, was the fear in ruling circles that the military coup would provoke mass opposition and strikes. Yoon pulled back, announcing on national TV that the martial law decree would be withdrawn and troops returned to barracks.

Nothing is resolved, however. The political standoff between the president and the Democrat-controlled National Assembly continues. Efforts are being made by the Democrats to impeach Yoon. Their trade union allies in the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) have called limited strikes and protests to demand the president step down. But the feebleness of the political response will only encourage a further attempt to resolve the political crisis through dictatorial means.

The coup attempt in South Korea is not simply the product of the individual Yoon, but reflects international processes fuelled by the breakdown of global capitalism and the resort to war and austerity that is provoking mass opposition, strikes and a broad political radicalisation of workers and youth.

In the United States, the centre of world imperialism, the fascist Donald Trump, who has openly declared he will rule as a dictator, is about to come to power to slash trillions in social programs, deploy the military to round up and expel millions of immigrants and use police state measures against political opponents and the working class. As well as prosecuting the wars against Russia in Ukraine and the Middle East, Trump will drastically intensify economic warfare, against China in particular, plunging the world towards a nuclear holocaust.

Europe is no exception. Far-right and openly fascist forces are either in power, as is the case in Italy, or play an increasingly dominant political role, as in Germany and France, where the government is on the point of collapse. All the European imperialist powers are boosting their

militaries and aggressively intervening in the war against Russia as the means to advance their strategic and economic interests, and compelling the working class to pay the price. This agenda cannot be imposed democratically.

The *Washington Post* has seized on the failed coup in South Korea to trumpet the strength of bourgeois democracy, declaring: “Fortunately, South Korea weathered the test, and its democracy emerged not only intact but also strengthened. At a time when democracy appears to be in retreat globally—and many Americans worry about its future in the United States—these events should reinvigorate faith that democratic institutions are resilient and people’s desire for freedom is universal.”

The *Post*, however, made very similar comments in the wake of Trump’s violent attempt to seize power on January 6, 2021 through the storming of the Capitol. While the coup failed, Trump plotted a more carefully prepared repetition in 2024, which in the event proved unnecessary as the political bankruptcy of the Democrats handed him the election. The Biden administration has now pledged a smooth transition to the fascistic Trump regime.

The prospect of a Trump administration may well have encouraged Yoon to make his own bid for dictatorship. Indeed, Yoon’s fascistic anti-communist rant against North Korean agents recalls Trump’s demagogic denunciations of “the enemy within”—above all, the working class.

It is undoubtedly the case that the Biden administration knew of the coup preparations in South Korea and, at the very least, turned a blind eye. The command structures of the 28,500 US troops in South Korea are closely integrated with the South Korean military. After Yoon pulled back, so did the White House, claiming it had not been officially informed of the coup in advance.

Yoon has been instrumental for the Biden administration in its preparations for war against China in formalising close military relations with Japan and in its backing for the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine.

The coup attempt in South Korea exposes the myth propagated by Washington, as it intensifies its confrontation with Beijing, that it is defending from autocratic China the “vibrant democracies” of Asia that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. The military dictatorships throughout the region that US imperialism backed to the hilt in the Cold War were only ended—with Washington’s support—when they became a barrier to integrating their “tiger economies” into globalised production chains.

South Korea is a case in point. The division of the Korean Peninsula by US imperialism in the wake of World War II was only possible through the installation of the puppet regime of

Syngman Rhee and the violent suppression of opposition, and maintained through the bloody Korean War that cost the lives of millions. While elections and the veneer of democracy was established in 1987 after mass strikes and protests, the state apparatus of the dictatorship remains largely intact. Yoon's People Power Party is a direct descendant of the party of the South Korean dictatorship and its vicious, anti-communist ideology.

A similar pattern finds expression throughout Asia, where the US-backed and installed dictatorships were nominally replaced by democracies that are now under huge strains or have collapsed. In Indonesia, the son-in-law of the dictator Suharto, Prabowo Subianto, is now the president and embraced by Washington, despite his numerous human rights atrocities. In the Philippines, the son of the dictator Ferdinand Marcos, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., is in power and functioning as a political attack dog for the US against China. In Thailand, the military regime established in the 2014 coup has been replaced by a nominally elected government in which the military holds the whip hand.

In every case, the so-called bourgeois democratic opposition—whether in the US, Europe or Asia—has facilitated the turn to fascism and dictatorship, underscoring one of the fundamentals of Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution. In the epoch of imperialism, the bourgeoisie as a whole is organically incapable of defending basic democratic rights. It fears the proletariat and its threat to the capitalist system far more than it fears the prospect of dictatorship.

The only means for defending democratic rights is the independent mobilisation of the working class, as part of the struggle for socialism internationally, to halt the plunge towards world war and the deepening social crisis facing humanity.

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