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SPOTLIGHT

South Korea's President Yoon Suk-yeol Removed from Office

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On 4 April, South Korea's Constitutional Court upheld the parliament's decision to impeach President Yoon Suk-yeol of the People's Power Party for illegally declaring martial law last December. Yoon was immediately removed from office and a snap presidential election will be held within 60 days, with Democratic Party leader Lee Jae-myung the clear favourite.

Why was Yoon removed from office?

Yoon's impeachment follows a [political crisis triggered by the president's decision to declare martial law on 3 December last year](#). The National Assembly's vote on 14 December 2024 on a motion to impeach Yoon led to his removal as president and referral of the case to the Constitutional Court. After 111 days, the court ruled unanimously (8-0) to remove Yoon from office, finding him guilty of all charges against him: illegally declaring martial law, attempting to illegally suspend all political activity, sending the army and police into parliament and the National Election Committee, and ordering the arrest of politicians and judges. The court said that Yoon's actions constituted a serious violation of the fundamental principles of the rule of law and democratic governance, damaging the constitutional order, endangering the stability of the state, and betraying public trust. Yoon became the second president in South Korea's history to be removed from office by impeachment. President Park Geun-hye suffered the same fate in 2017.

What comes next for Yoon?

In addition to constitutional responsibility, Yoon may face criminal consequences. The criminal case against him for treason in connection with the imposition of martial law led to the president's provisional arrest (he was detained from 15 January to 8 March this year, then released on procedural

grounds). The criminal trial will begin on 14 April at the Seoul District Court. Yoon faces the death penalty (which has not been carried out in South Korea since 1997) or life imprisonment. Yoon's impeachment and resulting loss of immunity means that he could face other charges, including abuse of power, alleged interference in the 2022 parliamentary elections, and corruption. Despite his removal from office and loss of all privileges, Yoon will be protected for up to 10 years by the Presidential Security Service, which is granted to former heads of state, but will be suspended if he is re-arrested. He may also seek to lead the far-right movement that has gained ground in recent months within the People's Power Party (PPP), from which Yoon hails.

What is the socio-political situation in South Korea?

The biggest political crisis in the Republic of Korea's democratic history deepened the country's socio-political polarisation. While around 75% of respondents supported Yoon's impeachment as recently as last December, this percentage has fallen in the months since. This was due to growing public dissatisfaction with the chaos surrounding Yoon's arrest and the actions of the liberal Democratic Party (DP), which, [with a majority in parliament](#), was seen by some members of the public and the political elite as abusing its power (for example, it also led to the impeachment of the acting president, Prime Minister Han Duck-soo, which the Constitutional Court eventually ruled to be unfounded). In a National Barometer Survey conducted in March/April this

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year, 57% of respondents were in favour of Yoon's impeachment, while 35% were against. At the same time, 46% of respondents expressed a lack of confidence in the Constitutional Court (the same percentage had confidence in it), while 44% said they would not accept its decision if it went against their views. Some of the public's dissatisfaction with the court's decision could be exploited by the conservative PPP, supported by 33% of respondents. The DP leads the polls with 37% support. However, the party's support is not that important because the next general election is not due until 2027.

What happens next?

According to Article 68 of the Constitution of the Republic of Korea, a snap presidential election must be held within 60 days (in this case, by 3 June). In the meantime, Prime Minister Han Duck-soo is the acting head of state and must announce an election date by 14 April. The interim nature of the government makes it difficult to respond to challenges, including the imposition of tariffs by the U.S. administration, which on 2 April, declared that South Korea will be subject to 25% tariffs. That means a *de facto* rupture by the U.S. of a free trade agreement in place since 2012.

The clear favourite in the presidential election is Lee Jae-myung, leader of the DP, supported by 33% of respondents. In second place is Kim Moon-soo of the PPP, a Yoon loyalist and current labour minister, with 9% support. While the DP's

candidate is certain to be Lee, the PPP candidate will be decided in the primaries. The growing polarisation, further accelerated by the start of the election campaign, will be reflected in mass demonstrations in the coming weeks. Growing right-wing radicalism raises the risk of incidents, including violence against political rivals.

How might the election result affect South Korea's foreign policy?

Regardless of the election result, the main foreign policy challenge for the new South Korean government will be to manage [the problems in its relationship with the U.S. administration](#). The new president will seek exemptions for South Korean companies, the avoidance of further tariffs, and the most favourable financial terms for the stationing of U.S. troops in South Korea. However, a victory for Lee Jae-myung could lead to significant changes in South Korea's foreign policy, including a shift away from [dialogue with Japan](#), a more conciliatory stance towards China and Russia, and an attempt to improve [inter-Korean relations](#). Neither the liberal nor conservative South Korean governments will want to support Ukraine with direct supplies of ammunition and weapons. Regardless of the change of government, South Korea will continue its [defence and arms industry cooperation with Poland](#), as support for arms exports enjoys cross-party support among South Korean elites.