

# South Korea's Yoon declared, then lifted, martial law. Why?

South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol backed down on his declaration of martial law but the tumultuous six hours recalled the country's dark pre-democracy period.

Updated today at 3:12 p.m. EST

🔊 5 min    ➦    📌    🗨️ 855



By [Adam Taylor](#)

After a tense early morning scene at South Korea's National Assembly — where a majority of lawmakers voted to block the martial law, despite the military presence at the parliament — [South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol](#) said Wednesday local time he would lift the order he had declared only hours before and withdraw troops.

Yoon's extraordinary declaration late on Tuesday night outraged many South Koreans and dredged up painful memories of how military rule was used in the country before it turned to democracy in the late 1980s.

When martial law was last declared in South Korea in 1980, it came after a coup that installed a military dictatorship. Pro-democracy activists, [mostly university students](#), protested in the city of Gwangju and special forces responded violently, killing about 200 people with machine guns and clubs.

## **South Korea political crisis, explained**

South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol [triggered the nation's biggest political crisis](#) in decades after abruptly declaring martial law late Tuesday, a move that set off an extraordinary [six hours of turmoil](#) before being overturned by lawmakers. Read more on [why Yoon imposed the order](#).

More than four decades later, [Yoon declared martial law again](#), this time accusing the opposition party of engaging in “anti-state” activities in alignment with North Korea.

The [order lasted barely six hours](#), but it will have wide-reaching ramifications in a country that has become known for its energetic democracy.

While Yoon's decision was a shock, it was not a total surprise. Rumors had swirled in South Korean political circles for months that the president was considering imposing martial law.

Officials with Yoon's People Power Party pushed back on the rumors publicly: In September, Yoon's ally Han Dong-[hoon publicly accused](#) opposition Democratic Party leader Lee Jae-myung of spreading "conspiracy theories" about impending martial law.

## Why did Yoon declare martial law?

Yoon, 63, has held South Korea's top office since 2022, when he succeeded Moon Jae-in, from the left-wing Democratic Party.

Unlike Moon, who favored dialogue with North Korea, Yoon had a conservative, hawkish background. He had risen to become the presidential candidate for the PPP after serving as prosecutor general of South Korea for two years before resigning amid disputes with the Moon government.

Yoon won the presidency in one of South Korea's tightest election races, and he quickly became mired in numerous scandals. Combined with moves that were widely seen as unnecessary, the scandals sent his approval ratings plummeting.

He made the sudden decision after his election to relocate the presidential office from Seoul's historic Blue House and to move the Defense Ministry — costly changes that prompted significant security concerns, despite little public support.

The South Korean president was criticized for his government's response to a crowd crush during Halloween in 2022 that killed 159 people in Seoul's Itaewon district. Then there was a crisis in the medical sector, with strikes and staff shortages this year as the government tried to impose changes.

The president's family came under scrutiny this year when hidden-camera footage of his wife accepting a pricey Dior handbag as a gift was released.

Yoon's approval rating hit a low of 17 percent last month, according to the Dong-A Ilbo newspaper. Yoon's party also suffered a crushing defeat in parliamentary elections in April. Without a parliamentary majority, Yoon was forced to veto bills and had been locked in a standoff over a budget bill that he could not veto.

## What did martial law mean in South Korea?

South Korea's constitution spells out how a president can declare martial law in Article 77, stating it should be done 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."

The same article also says that martial law can be overturned by a majority vote in the National Assembly.

In his remarks Tuesday evening, Yoon took aim at the National Assembly, accusing it of becoming a "monster that destroys the liberal democratic system" and saying that it had proposed 22 motions to impeach government officials during his administration.

The president said he would impose martial law to stop "shameless pro-North anti-state forces that plunder the freedom and happiness of our people."

A military decree signed Tuesday suspended all political activities, as well as "fake news, manipulation of public opinion and false propaganda." It said it would place news media "under martial law control" and ordered striking medical workers to return to work within 48 hours.

The decree was signed by army Gen. Park An-su, who was designated by Yoon as "martial law commander."

Martial law has a long history in South Korea, which transitioned to democracy in 1987. It has been imposed 16 times since the end of World War II, most recently in 1980 after the assassination of military strongman Park Chung-hee the year before.

The 1980 martial law period is most notorious for the Gwangju Uprising and subsequent military crackdown. The incident has since been depicted in South Korean films and literature.

## How did South Korea's opposition stop it?

While there had been talk of martial law over recent months, some analysts argued that the country had changed and that past instances of martial law were unlikely to return.

"In a high-level democracy like South Korea, could a president realistically pursue martial law, which is tantamount to a palace coup?" Wang Son-taek, an adjunct professor at Sogang University and former journalist, wrote for the Korea Herald in September. "Simply put, it is almost impossible."

Shortly after Yoon made the move, even some allies were quickly condemning the move. Han, the PPP party leader who previously called talk of martial law a conspiracy theory, said Tuesday evening that the move was "wrong" and pledged to stop it.

Early Wednesday local time, South Korean lawmakers voted to overturn martial law, with the 190 present representing a majority in the 300-person National Assembly.

Though it was initially unclear if Yoon and military officials would accept the vote, the South Korean president made another address to the nation before dawn on Wednesday: He told the nation he would end martial law and withdraw the military.