Since the Korean War, South Korea has witnessed no fewer than **eleven coup attempts**. Among them, the military coups led by **Park Chung-hee** and **Chun Doo-hwan** remain the most prominent. However, the case of **Yoon Suk-yeol** presents a departure from this pattern. His actions represent what we might call a **hybrid coup** — one that blends civilian and military elements.

Whereas Park and Chun rose to power through the traditional route of direct military force, Yoon's path is more complex. Park relied on a coalition of Army officers, and Chun's power stemmed from elite military factions such as **Hanahoe** and the Defense Security Command. In contrast, Yoon's consolidation of power originated **outside the military**, built through the strategic control of **civilian institutions** — notably the **prosecution service, police, the Board of Audit and Inspection, and national intelligence agencies** — and only later incorporated **military force**, including the **Special Warfare Command, Counterintelligence Command**, and **Capital Defense Command**.

This hybrid structure is central to understanding the nature of Yoon's alleged coup. It was not a singular moment of military takeover but rather a **long-term personalization of power**, where **civilian power was co-opted to dismantle political opposition and shield Yoon and his close associates** from scrutiny. When the moment came, elements of this non-military apparatus also participated in facilitating and justifying the eventual **deployment of force**.

What makes this case even more troubling is its **legal and institutional veneer**. The coup was wrapped in the garments of legality — hidden behind procedures and laws, even as it was backed by military presence. This duality renders prosecution and accountability far more difficult than in past examples.

Perhaps the most striking difference from previous coups is the effort to **mobilize public sentiment psychologically**. In democracies, legitimacy ultimately derives from public support. During the impeachment proceedings against Yoon, he remarkably maintained an approval rating of **around 40%**. How was this possible?

One explanation lies in the entrenchment of **pro-Yoon forces within civilian power structures.** These actors not only delayed legal consequences but were **deeply embedded in Korea's political and legal institutions**, enabling resistance from within. Another explanation involves a broader **shift in the political landscape.**

As one analyst put it, "Just like Trump's loyal base in the U.S., there exists a consistent 20% of the population in Korea with strong far-right or alt-right leanings. These individuals are not a new political force; they've always existed. Yoon's attempted insurrection simply activated and organized them — particularly through platforms like YouTube." Ironically, this digital cohesion may have helped Yoon hold out for more than **40 days after his arrest warrant**, despite mounting legal pressure.

And so, we must ask: **What fuels this group's unwavering loyalty?**
What kind of information ecosystem binds them together and pushes them into action?
Are the truths they believe in actually true?

That, I will leave for our next conversation.

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ABout the questions:

Before that, I told that there are several kinds of fuels to motivate the public to mobilize it for Yoon Seok Yeol year. And what the question is the Lee Jae Myung, President, Lee Jae Myung, is also criminal. That is one of the fuel to mobilize the public the far right one, and for the people who ask this question, I want to ask that. Well, like Professor baking said, no one is above the law, so the you know, the justice will be fine after his presidency, or during his presidency, if something will be clear, but now we can ask the real questions that the are the charges with the Nathan said the felony and the bribery, the charges are currently suspended. But is it bigger than the interaction, or is it bigger than the modular? Is it the bigger to overturn the country right now? Then right now, this can be pending even the former President Lee Myung BA, his trial was suspended during his presidency and after his presidency, we found out who was the WHO owner, who

was the owner of the DAS, and who was the felony? And this can be happen. Why now?
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On **December 3rd**, the day President Yoon carried out what many view as a **loyalist coup**, Korean media outlets revealed striking differences in how they described the event.

From a legal standpoint, there was no major disagreement.
The correct term was **martial law**, and the consequence — **insurrection**.
Up to that point, most media agreed.

But things became blurry when it came to the term **“coup.”**
A few independent outlets openly referred to it as a **“loyalist coup.”**
Others avoided the term entirely — either out of caution or pressure.

Unfortunately, **KBS**, Korea’s public broadcaster, did not even open a discussion on the term.
That’s deeply disappointing.
Given that its president and senior executives were appointed under the Yoon administration, editorial independence was clearly compromised.

By contrast, I’ve heard that **many newsrooms held internal debates** about how to define and frame the event.
And that, at least, is encouraging.

There’s also been a noticeable shift.
More journalists are moving away from **“he said, she said” reporting** — simply repeating what politicians claim without analysis or context.
That’s a small but important step forward.

Still, the language we use matters.
Because what we call something shapes how we understand it — and how history remembers it.

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I mentioned before, in the front of the discussions the yoonsoon year made a coup of the hybrid style. Before the coup, he controlled the institutions like Intel agencies and the prosecution's office or police or the audit government. Then he used the power of the institutions and the people's trust

on the institution. On the contrary, people had trust, big trust. The Korean people had a big trust in the institution, but he exploited the trust. So I am not very positive. I admire the, you know, positive view of the professor back but I'm not that positive. I'm very pessimistic, because the institutional system or the institutional power can be overturned by the president anytime, like yunsoon Yang, what he had before, and even the President Trump now, he deployed the National Guard in Washington, DC. It was really, really, you know, was disappointing and shocking, and he just followed the path and the mirror of the Yoon. Then I think, what can save us? What can save the public? Then we have to be awakened by ourselves that we have to question, and we have to dance in the street and we have to wave the stick. So I now, actually, I don't have any answer there. How can we complement the root word of the systems?

IBA Webinar, September 3, 2025
Answers to the Questions

Tae-Ung Baik

I think the 12.3 martial law and the insurrection crime committed by Yoon Suk-yeol is showing the current stage of democracy in Korea. Korea has experienced authoritarian regimes in 70s and 80s. The current prosecution system and legal process is a product of the constitution enacted alongside the democratization of 1987, revealing both its achievements and limitations. While the judiciary and prosecution were entrusted with the role of the final place for resolving issues through the rule of law and judicial procedures, they have also accumulated unchecked power within an atmosphere that frames all problems in Korean society through a judicial and prosecutorial lens. In particular, the Korean prosecution was not merely an institution that prosecutes; it was an investigative body that directs police investigations and holds full authority over investigation and prosecution, including requesting warrants, filing indictments, and maintaining prosecutions. It is now significantly weakened than before, but the power of prosecution is still a matter of serious concern in Korea. The special investigation units and investigative power of prosecutors were misused. The political abuses of the prosecution led to the birth of the Yoon Suk-yeol administration.

Yoon Suk-yeol's self-coup unfolds against a backdrop of deepening democratic crisis and mounting public criticism of the administration. On one hand, the opposition's overwhelming majority in the National Assembly has begun exerting some checks on the administration's unilateral rule, while public anger over various scandals involving First Lady Kim Keon-hee and the Yoon administration's abnormal exercise of power began manifesting as a direct crisis for the regime through candlelight protests and the so-called “Revolution of Light.” To escape this crisis, Yoon Suk-yeol attempted to break through using the method of a constitutional emergency martial law. Initially, he contemplated methods like provoking North Korea with drones to cause a localized conflict. Ultimately, however, he declared an unjustified state of emergency under the pretext of eradicating anti-state forces. This state of emergency itself constituted a violation of the Constitution and amounted to insurrection crime. Within mere hours, it was repealed by a swift vote in the National Assembly, leading to the lifting of martial law.

The basic requirement of martial law under Article 77 of the Constitution, “when it is necessary to use the armed forces to meet military needs or maintain public order in a state of war or similar national emergency,” was not met. (Cf. the Martial Law Act, “when social order is extremely disturbed and the performance of administrative and judicial functions is significantly impaired”). The Cabinet's deliberations under Article 2(5) of the Martial Law Act were reportedly not duly carried out, and the National Assembly was not notified in accordance with Article 4(1) of the Martial Law Act.

In particular, Martial Law Decree No. 1 prohibits “all political activities, including the activities of the National Assembly, local councils, political parties, political associations, rallies, and demonstrations,” and Yoon Seok-yeol has mobilized martial law forces to suspend the constitutional powers of the National Assembly, storming into the National Assembly, occupying the Election Commission, entering some media outlets, and engaging in unconstitutional activities that violate fundamental rights of the Constitution. In particular, despite Article 13 of

the Martial Law Act stipulating that no member of the National Assembly shall be arrested or detained during martial law unless he or she is an active criminal, it is clear that the emergency martial law, its direct activities, and its preliminary measures were all part of an outright act of insurrection, as evidenced by the testimony of the National Intelligence Service's first chief that he received a list of arrested lawmakers, including women and opposition representatives, from the counterintelligence commander.

On December 3, 2024, I was in Seoul near Yeoido. The moment martial law was declared, I felt as if a sharp dagger was aiming at my heart and closing in. For those of us who experienced martial law in the 80s, the 2024 martial law was an unbelievable, strange occurrence. Yet most people felt its vivid meaning in their bones, realizing a situation had arisen where we must fight with our lives. Some immediately rushed toward the National Assembly building in Yeouido. I, however, immediately launched into full-fledged resistance by writing on Facebook that this martial law was unconstitutional, amounted to an act of insurrection, and was therefore null and void from the outset.

The biggest difference was probably that, unlike the desperate, life-or-death resistance of 1980, this time we fought based on the Constitution and laws, drawing on our accumulated experience and trust in democracy. We believed in the resilience of the National Assembly and existing state institutions such as Constitutional Court, confronting reality head-on without retreating. Moreover, it was not destructive or violent resistance, but an orderly march of light, a resistance fueled by the constructive energy of festivals, laughter, and hope for the future. In this sense, Korean democracy had embarked on a fight it could not lose, knowing this would ultimately become a process of elevating democracy to a higher level.

South Korea's democracy and human rights have made tremendous progress, developing through unprecedented measures compared to any other country in the world. Working at the UN Human Rights Council for seven years, I took great pride in Korea's democracy. However, during that process, far-right forces grew, and the Yoon Suk-yeol administration sought to establish its regime through a certain solidarity with those far-right forces. These far-right forces were consistently linked to anti-women, anti-human rights currents centered around some churches in Korea, and also aligned with the ideological sentiments of past military and conservative regimes. In other words, the reckoning with the past authoritarian elements, and the former human rights-abusing regime sought to regain power. Yet, faced with Yoon Suk-yeol's coup attempt, the majority of South Koreans chose an orderly campaign for democracy. They turned crisis into opportunity through the National Assembly's impeachment vote, the Constitutional Court's impeachment ruling, and the subsequent presidential election, which rejected the forces of insurrection.

Under the Lee Jae-myung administration, Yoon and his accomplices to martial law and insurrection are being investigated and punished, while reforms for new change—particularly prosecutorial, judicial, and media reforms—are underway. Further new changes, including constitutional amendments, are anticipated.

I think hope lies in the fact that young people in their 20s and 30s played a prominent role in this process of change. Of course, concerns also exist regarding the growing conservatism and

rightward leanings among men in their 20s, which contrasts with the progressive stance of women in the same age group. [Today, the world is seeing a decline in democracy and a resurgence of nationalist authoritarianism. The change is global, as the incitement to insurrection in the United States symbolizes. Putin in Russia and Xi Jinping in China are not the only ones who are ruling with an iron fist and reviving authoritarianism. Many Asian countries, such as the Philippines, Thailand, and Hong Kong, are witnessing authoritarianism. That is why the civil resistance of Korea's Revolution of Light should be a new spark of hope for them].

The Constitutional Court's unanimous decision to uphold the impeachment was an inevitable process. This is because martial law and insurrection were clear violations of the Constitution. Had the Constitutional Court denied this, the constitutional system itself would have collapsed. Public concern persists over selective prosecution and abuse of power by prosecutors, the judicialization of politics, and the subsequent politicization of the judiciary by the courts. This is now being addressed through the drive for prosecutorial and judicial reform, alongside the special prosecutor system.

The hope for democracy in Korea lay in the free energy of citizens holding light sticks in front of the National Assembly and on the streets. In the case of the United States, public action against authoritarian ruling is weaker than expected; many intellectuals fear repercussions for their actions; and there is a tendency to prioritize immediate interests over the values the country has long upheld. The courts seem to be acting as a bulwark against the worst outcomes. It is true that hopes appear pinned on the next election. However, I want to emphasize that democracy truly flourishes through the active participation of the public.