Party Before Principle: How South Korea's Political Culture Threatens Democracy

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Following months of political turmoil and a dramatic declaration of martial law on December 4, 2024, by former President Yoon Suk-yeol, South Korea held snap elections on June 3, 2025. With Yoon impeached, opposition leader Lee Jae-myung was sworn in as the new president of South Korea.

However, the events since December 4 have exposed significant flaws in South Korea's political system. Although Yoon's declaration of martial law—justified by his claim to "eliminate anti-state forces"—found some supporters, it undeniably triggered a deeply rooted national trauma and revealed structural weaknesses in Korea's democratic safeguards.

Political consciousness among Koreans

South Korea's population, having lived through an era of coups, martial law, and dictatorship from 1966 to 1988—and

with younger generations educated about this history of state violence and civil rights violations despite economic growth—has developed a deep awareness that democracy is never natural. This explains why citizens swiftly gathered at the National Assembly and why its members held their ground on the day martial law was declared. Following that, they staged non-violent protests and questioned whether historical experiences and lessons could help navigate the present crisis.

These collective actions helped reinforce the value of democracy and eventually helped South Korea course-correct, exemplifying what might be called "democracy preserved without bloodshed"—a contrast to the oft-cited phrase "democracy written in blood," which resonates with many Koreans. However, unlike in fairy tales, reality continues beyond the moment: presidential impeachment and subsequent snap elections alone do not guarantee a well-established democracy.

Han Duck-soo's controversial tenure as acting president

The Constitutional Court's ruling was followed by new crises—Han Duck-soo's resignation as acting president and the People Power Party's (PPP) chaotic candidate battle—highlighting that certain maneuvers within both the administration and major political parties raise legitimate concerns.

Following President Yoon's removal from office, Prime Minister Han Duck-soo assumed the role of Acting President as prescribed by the Constitution. However, he began governing under the shadow of his potential involvement in the discussions about martial law. Although the Constitution Court ruled that there was insufficient evidence of Han's involvement to bar him from office, the absence of meeting minutes or administrative records regarding martial law exposed him to criticism. This lack of transparency contradicted a fundamental tenet of democratic governance.

On April 8, Acting President Han appointed two Constitutional Court justices—positions normally filled by an elected president—and set the early presidential election for June 3. Constitutional scholars expressed concern that appointing successor justices without a popular mandate could be unconstitutional, prompting National Assembly Speaker Woo Won-shik to file an injunction with the Constitutional Court to suspend these appointments.

On the other hand, Han delayed appointing prosecutors to the Corruption Investigation Office for High-ranking Officials (CIO) for seven months. The CIO is responsible for investigating and prosecuting crimes by high-ranking officials to enhance transparency and trust in public service. On April 14, a member of the CIO's personnel committee filed a lawsuit against this inaction.

As the April 15 deadline to declare a presidential candidacy approached, Han remained ambiguous about his intentions. Just one day before the deadline, he hinted that he would fulfil his 'duty,' but later changed his mind. Eventually, he officially entered the race as the PPP's presidential candidate for the May 10 election.

Han's political maneuvering reached its nadir when the PPP leadership attempted to install him as their candidate through a controversial 3AM procedural move that revoked Kim Moon-soo's legitimately won nomination. When party members rejected this undemocratic move, Han was forced to withdraw, leaving the administration's credibility severely damaged. This episode exposed how easily institutional norms can be sacrificed for political expediency during crises.

Internal fighting in political parties

At the ground level, police and local government officials continued to operate emergency protocols, managing both pro- and anti-impeachment demonstrations while preparing for a

potential crisis. While the administrative branch faced challenges regarding transparency and ethics in public service, the political domain struggled with its structural issues. These issues included inadequate management of internal conflicts and an insular organizational culture, longstanding, endemic concerns whose severity became particularly pronounced during the impeachment crisis.

South Korea has two major political parties: the conservative People Power Party and the progressive Democratic Party of Korea (DPK). The primary challenge both parties face is their failure to achieve internal cohesion.

People Power Party

Before the impeachment, the PPP was broadly divided between the Pro-Yoon faction, who supported former President Yoon Suk-yeol, and the Anti-Yoon faction, who maintained a distance from his leadership. Following the impeachment, these divisions have evolved, with members aligning with former party leader Han Dong-hoon, Acting President Han Duck-soo, or remaining less affiliated with either camp.

On April 14, PPP floor leader representative Kwon Sung-dong called for unity during an emergency committee meeting. However, achieving genuine cohesion remained difficult. Many party members still labelled those who supported President Yoon's impeachment as 'betrayers.' Deep division between factions also remained unresolved. After Kim Moon-soo won the party's primary on May 3, the leadership tried to replace him with Han Duck-soo. Former party head Han Dong-hoon called this an 'undemocratic power play' and said it used tactics 'not even North Korea would use.' The attempt caused chaos. Interim leader Kwon Young-se resigned, and the other primary candidate refused to support Kim's campaign. These events exposed deep internal rifts that weakened the party's ability to function effectively during a crucial transition.

Democratic Party of Korea

Similarly, the DPK faced its own internal divisions before the recent political upheaval. Controversy arose when some party members began to believe that the main faction supporting party leader Lee Jae-myung allegedly discriminated against non-supportive party members during the candidate nomination process. This discord resulted in several party members declaring their departure from the party in early 2024.

In this context, the Democratic Party appeared to display superficial unity as a strategic maneuver to secure immediate political advantage, rather than presenting positions formed through internal deliberation and genuine consensus. While factional dynamics may be inherent to party politics, it is deeply concerning that these organizational problems have become entrenched rather than resolved during the impeachment crisis.

Secondly, both major parties appeared to fail in building sustainable political organizations due to their closed organizational cultures. These parties' discussions and relationships predominantly function through what Koreans call "□ □ □□(lining up well)" culture, where aligning oneself with powerful figures is prioritized over substantive contributions. Communication and party positions are largely determined by specific factions that form around these power dynamics.

Caught in this system, young politicians attracted to either party are often showcased to project a "youth-friendly image" but are rarely empowered to participate meaningfully in key party decisions or groomed for future leadership roles. When interviewing youth members of one party, they said, "For the first few years, I was dedicated to this party believing it could realize political values, but now my expectation that this organization can be properly reformed has completely

disappeared, and I came dreaming of being a voice for young people, but they only seek me out when they need someone to stand before the media, like during election campaigns.”

In conclusion, both administrative and political behavior revealed a troubling pattern in Korean politics. Genuine democratic resilience cannot be achieved until the representatives of democracy themselves embody democratic principles in their own institutional practices and organizational cultures.