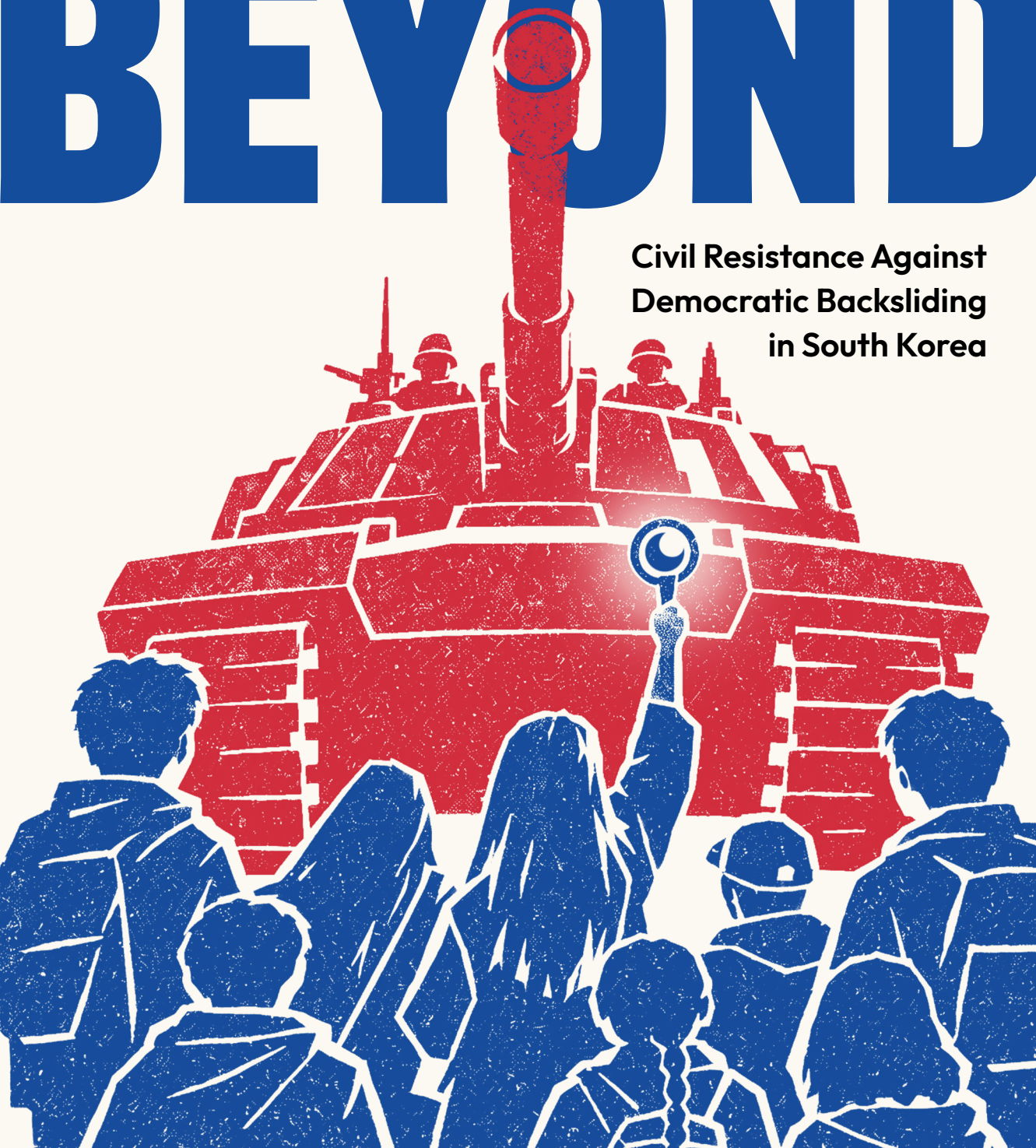
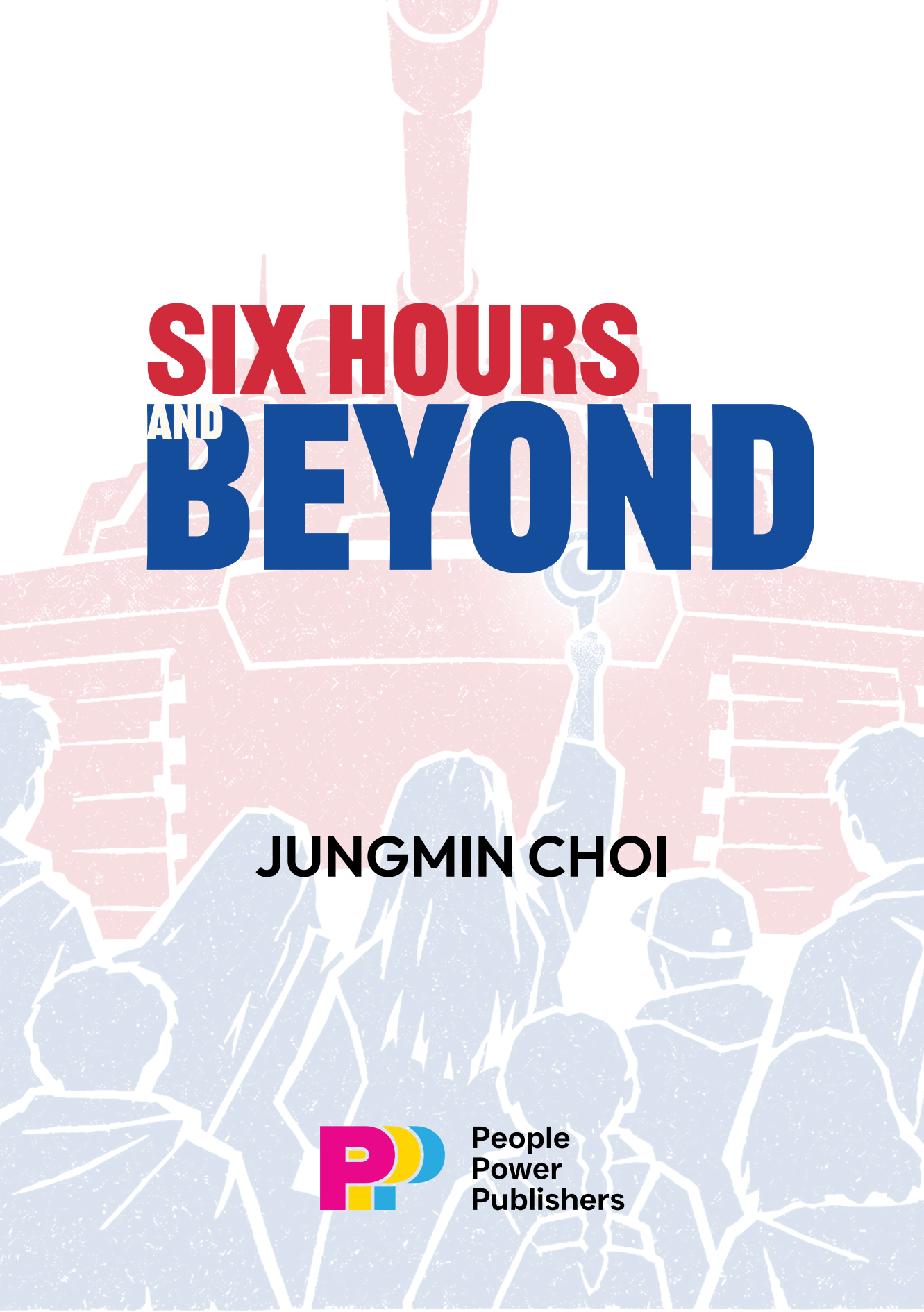
JUNGMIN CHOI

SIX HOURS AND BEYOND

Civil Resistance Against Democratic Backsliding in South Korea





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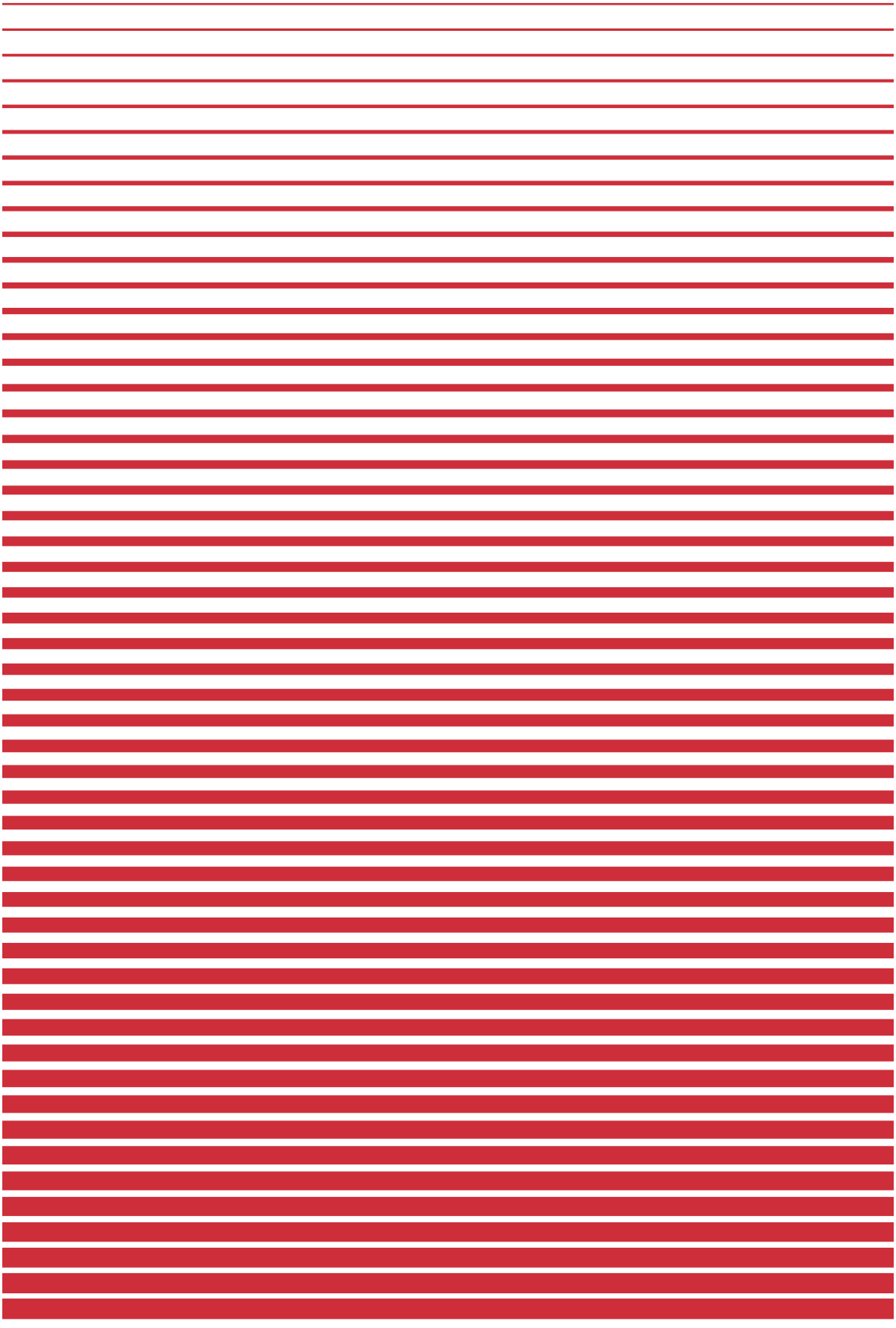


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List of Key Places and Events

Name	Description
Places	
Gwangju	City in southwestern South Korea and site of the May 1980 uprising against military rule; its memory became a moral foundation of the democracy movement.
Gwanghwamun Square	Square in central Seoul where the heads of major civil society organizations declared "comprehensive resistance" on the morning of December 4, 2024; from late 2024, the site of weekly pro-government rallies.
Hannam-dong	District in central Seoul where Yoon relocated the presidential residence and confined himself after his impeachment; the focus of the contest over the warrant to detain him and of overnight occupations. The Speaker's official residence is also there.
Namtaeryeong	Pass on Seoul's southern boundary where police halted a farmers' tractor convoy on December 21, 2024, prompting thousands of citizens to converge overnight.
National Assembly	South Korea's legislature. Under Article 77(5) of the Constitution, the president must lift martial law when a majority of its members demands it; the focal point of resistance on December 3–4, 2024.
Yeouido	The island in Seoul on which the National Assembly stands.
Yongsan	Site of the presidential office after its relocation and of the Ministry of National Defense compound at Yongsan Garrison, where the Martial Law Command was established on December 3, 2024.
Events	
October 26 Incident (1979)	Assassination of President Park Chung-hee by the head of his own intelligence agency; martial law was declared the following day and lasted 456 days.
Seoul Spring (1979–80)	The months after Park's assassination, when many Koreans hoped that democracy was finally within reach.

Name	Description
December 12 mutiny (1979)	Mutiny within the army led by Major General Chun Doo-hwan, commander of the Defense Security Command, that enabled him and his allies to take control of the military.
Gwangju Democratization Movement (May 18–27, 1980)	Uprising in Gwangju against the new military regime, suppressed by the army; it left hundreds dead and thousands wounded, arrested, or otherwise affected. Also called the May 18 Democratic Uprising.
June Democratic Uprising (1987)	Nationwide demonstrations that won South Korea's current system of direct presidential elections.
Great Workers' Struggle (1987)	Wave of union organizing and strikes from July to September 1987 that broadened the social foundations of civil society.
Candlelight Movement (2016–17)	Months of nonviolent mass demonstrations that led to the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye and her removal by the Constitutional Court.
Itaewon disaster (2022)	Crowd crush at a Halloween festival that killed 159 people and injured nearly 200.
Death of Corporal Chae (2023)	Death of a Marine during a search operation at a flood site in Yecheon in July 2023, and the controversy over the subsequent investigation.
December 3, 2024	President Yoon Suk Yeol declares emergency martial law at about 10:27 P.M.; the National Assembly votes to demand its lifting at 1:01 A.M., and Yoon announces that it will be lifted at 4:27 A.M. on December 4.
Seoul Western District Court riot (January 19, 2025)	Storming of the court by hundreds of Yoon's supporters after it approved a warrant to keep him in detention.
Constitutional Court decision (April 4, 2025)	Unanimous ruling upholding Yoon's impeachment and removing him from office.

List of Acronyms

Acronym	Full name
BISANG Action	BISANG Action for Yoon Out & Social Reform (also given as the BISANG Action for the Immediate Resignation of Yoon Suk Yeol and Social Reform), the coalition that organized the candlelight rallies of 2024–25; *bisang* (비상) is the Korean word for "emergency"
CCEJ	Citizens' Coalition for Economic Justice
CNCR	Center for Nonviolent Conflict Research
ICNC	International Center on Nonviolent Conflict
JTBC	JoongAng Tongyang Broadcasting Company, a private cable broadcaster
KBS	Korean Broadcasting System, the national broadcaster of South Korea
KCTU	Korean Confederation of Trade Unions
KMWU	Korean Metal Workers' Union, the largest industrial federation within the KCTU
MBC	Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation, a public broadcaster
NEC	National Election Commission
PPP	People Power Party, the conservative party of President Yoon Suk Yeol
PSPD	People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy
SBS	Seoul Broadcasting System, a private commercial broadcaster
YTN	Yonhap Television News, a 24-hour news channel

INTRO
DUCTION

South Korea, December 3, 2024, around 10:27 P.M.

On television there was a shocking announcement: President Yoon Suk Yeol declared martial law.[1] It was the first such declaration in forty-five years, and the first since South Korea's democratic transition in 1987. The last time martial law was declared—following the assassination of President Park Chung-hee during the October 26 Incident of 1979—it lasted for 456 days. In contrast, the 2024 declaration—an attempted self-coup, in which a sitting president tried to use the powers of his office to end democracy and establish dictatorial rule[2]—came to an end within six hours, despite the deployment of heavily armed martial law troops to the National Assembly.

How can we understand this outcome? Explanations that emphasize luck or spontaneous citizen mobilization alone are insufficient.

Unlike in 1979, the 2024 coup attempt was broadcast live and immediately disseminated through social media platforms and individual livestreams, alerting citizens who responded by coming to the National Assembly within minutes. They acted without hesitation, drawing on decades of experience in democratization movements and mass protest mobilizations, while maintaining nonviolent discipline even under highly volatile conditions. At times they sought to persuade soldiers and police officers; at other times they physically obstructed them. In doing so, they played a crucial role in ensuring the failure of the martial law forces that night.

As access to the National Assembly was restricted, lawmakers, parliamentary aides, and National Assembly staff entered the

1. Korean names in this report are given in Korean order, with the family name first; for example, the family name of Yoon Suk Yeol is Yoon. Accordingly, the names of Korean authors are not inverted in the notes and bibliography, except for authors who publish under a Western-order name.

2. A self-coup refers to an attempt by a sitting head of government to seize power in violation of the constitution or to neutralize the institutions designed to constrain that power. It is distinct from a coup carried out by the military or other forces against an incumbent government. Although the South Korean Constitution explicitly provides for martial law, the Constitutional Court ruled that former President Yoon's declaration of martial law was unconstitutional and unlawful. A trial court subsequently found him to be the ringleader of the insurrection and sentenced him to life imprisonment (see Chapters 6 and 7). The first-instance courts that tried Yoon, former prime minister Han Duck-soo, and former interior minister Lee Sang-min all found that the declaration was aimed at subverting the constitutional order; the court in Han's case described it as an "insurrection from above," a form "also called a self-coup," and observed that such self-coups have in many cases succeeded, turning those in power into dictators. Seoul Central District Court, Judgment 2025Gohap129 et al., 1016–17; Judgment 2025Gohap1219, 120; Judgment 2025Gohap1172, 31.

Well-known precedents include Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines, who declared martial law in September 1972, shut down Congress, and remained in power until the People Power Revolution of 1986; and Jorge Serrano Elías in Guatemala, whose attempt to dissolve Congress and the Supreme Court on May 25, 1993, collapsed within about a week after business, labor, Indigenous, and other civic groups rejected it. See Scott, "Public Demands Lead to Reforms."

For a detailed discussion of resistance to such "executive usurpation," see Sharp and Jenkins, *Anti-Coup*. For a broader overview of civilian resistance to coups, see Zunes, *Civil Resistance Against Coups*.

Table 1. The two dimensions of anti-militarist infrastructure

Internal infrastructure	External infrastructure
Historical memory, constitutional literacy, and civic sovereignty	Organizational networks and communication channels
Motivated citizens to act and gave their action legitimacy	Turned that motivation into rapid, coordinated mobilization
Memories of Gwangju (1980), the 1987 uprising, and the "Seoul Spring"; viewers citing Article 77(5) of the Constitution within eighty seconds of the livestream; declarations that "the people are the source of power"	Standing coalitions such as the Emergency Action and the National Action; the KCTU's federations and regional headquarters; Lee Jae-myung's livestream, group chats, and social media; ties among couples, families, and friends

compound by climbing over walls with the assistance of citizens. Parliamentary staff moved in a coordinated manner to ensure that the legislative vote to lift martial law could proceed. Parliamentary aides joined citizens in erecting barricades and confronting armed martial law troops in order to buy time for the plenary session.

The failure of martial law was rooted in capacities like these, accumulated through decades of democratic practice, movement memory, and a deep commitment to civilian control of the military. This report argues that these accumulated capacities can be understood as an "anti-militarist infrastructure" composed of two mutually reinforcing dimensions (table 1):

1. *External infrastructure*, consisting of organizational networks and communication channels.

2. *Internal infrastructure*, consisting of historical memory, constitutional literacy, and civic sovereignty.

Anti-Militarist Infrastructure and Democracy

The people who mobilized and stopped the coup attempt of 2024 were anti-militarist in the sense that they fiercely opposed the use of the military as an instrument of political rule. They were not against the military as an institution, or hostile to the soldiers who serve in it. In fact, many people addressed the soldiers before them as fellow citizens, and after martial law was lifted some even applauded the troops as they withdrew.

Yet people understood that the principal threat to democracy has repeatedly come from a politicized military. The South Korean military's political intervention propped up dictatorship until 1987 and remained a force undermining democracy even thereafter. As a result, people built civic capacities over decades of resistance clustered around three commitments:

1. Civilian control of the armed forces.

2. Regarding soldiers not as enemies to be destroyed but as fellow citizens in uniform who can be persuaded.

3. The principle that disobedience to an unlawful order is a legitimate civic duty.

Of these three commitments, civilian control of the military has the broadest consensus, forged in the long struggle against dictatorship. In contrast, the conviction that unlawful orders should be refused was sustained more narrowly, by peace and human-rights movements whose campaigns—conscientious objection among them—remained unpopular and were often derided. Yet even here, particular refusals won unexpectedly broad public sympathy when they were tied to a cause that the public already shared.[3] What the night of December 3 revealed was that even commitments cultivated at the margins could, at a decisive moment, be activated far more widely than their everyday support would suggest.

Reinforcing this is the fact that since the 1987 pro-democracy movement, citizens have engaged in nonviolent direct action—such as rallies, overnight sit-ins, and strikes—alongside institutional participation like voting, and this repertoire of resistance has become a force that both safeguards and advances democracy. These accumulated practices of nonviolent resistance and civilian control formed the foundation for democratic consolidation.[4]

As an analytical framework, anti-militarist infrastructure helps explain the speed, organization, and unity shown by South Koreans as they defended democratic rule in 2024. It also is a contribution to the broader field of civil resistance studies concerned with democratic erosion from within. While the process by which democracies die is well documented, this report examines how citizens stopped democratic collapse.[5]

Data Sources

Sometimes the period of time to act decisively is short, and so this study focuses primarily on the period between December 3 and 4, 2024, which determined the direction of the entire country. This period was the critical juncture from which all subsequent developments—including

3. Two examples illustrate this. In 2003, Private Kang Chul-min, while serving on active duty, publicly refused to continue his service in protest against South Korea's dispatch of troops to the Iraq War, demanding the deployment be withdrawn; in 2008, Lee Gil-joon, a conscripted riot policeman, refused orders to suppress candlelight demonstrations. Both refusals drew notably broader public support than conscientious objection ordinarily received. These acts belong to a longer lineage of conscience within the South Korean military itself, reaching back to the "declarations of conscience" made by serving soldiers and conscripted riot police between 1987 and 1993, who denounced unlawful practices within the armed forces. See Shin Jae-wook, "Identity Formation of Military Democratization Activists."
4. Lee Ju-hee, "Democratic Consolidation in South Korea"; Joo Sung-soo, "Civic Participation and Democracy."
5. Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*.

an impeachment vote and the sustained candlelight mobilizations that followed—emerged. The actions that people took in those six hours established the path and trajectory of resistance.

This report draws on a rich volume of data in its analysis, including:

- 12,372 real-time YouTube comments posted during then-opposition leader Lee Jae-myung's livestream, 12,184 comments posted after the livestream ended, 106 interviews from KBS's (Korean Broadcasting System—the national broadcaster of South Korea) interview series *Geunal Geugot* (That Day, That Place) documenting the experiences of individuals present at the National Assembly, four in-depth interviews with leaders of the BISANG Action for Yoon Out & Social Reform (hereafter BISANG Action),[6] the white paper published by BISANG Action, records of the National Assembly's Special Committee on Investigation into the Alleged Insurrection by the Yoon Suk Yeol Government's Declaration of Emergency Martial Law (hereafter the Special Committee), Constitutional Court impeachment hearings, and other state-level investigative materials.

The YouTube comments were used primarily to analyze the speed of mobilization and the immediate interpretive frames through which citizens understood unfolding events. The KBS interviews were used to reconstruct individual experiences and decision-making processes. This is a practitioner-oriented qualitative approach rather than a systematic content analysis. Public comments were analyzed through close reading, supplemented by a simple count of keywords, while interview transcripts were examined to identify recurring themes. Quotations are used to illustrate patterns observed across multiple sources, rather than to constitute a statistical sample. Accordingly, this report does not claim that the individuals quoted are representative of the participant population as a whole.

To verify the behavior of military and police personnel, this report draws on records of the parliamentary investigation, Constitutional Court impeachment proceedings, and several documentaries and investigative reports produced by the media. Particularly valuable were the recent commendations awarded by the Ministry of National Defense to military personnel who refused unlawful and improper orders during the December 3 martial law crisis.

6. BISANG Action united labor, civic, religious, and other groups under a minimal common platform—Yoon's immediate removal, the restoration of constitutional order, and broader social reform—and organized the daily and weekend candlelight rallies that anchored the movement. Participating organizations numbered around 1,500 at its December 2024 launch and grew to roughly 1,740 by April 2025.

The collected materials nevertheless have clear limitations. The YouTube livestream data are drawn exclusively from the channel of then-opposition leader Lee Jae-myung and therefore contain inherent structural biases. To partly address this limitation, the report also draws on testimony from Han Dong-hoon, who was the leader of the People Power Party at the time, as well as from other party officials who opposed the declaration of martial law that night. The KBS interview series is itself an edited and curated collection of testimonies, while the BISANG Action white paper constitutes a form of self-account. These limitations are significant. To address them, this report seeks to increase reliability by cross-checking individual claims across multiple types of sources whenever possible.

CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND: CIVIL RESISTANCE AND DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING IN SOUTH KOREA

The resistance that emerged on the night of December 3 was not a sudden or isolated event. Rather, it represented the activation—under conditions of acute crisis—of democratic experience and organizational capacity accumulated by South Korean civil society over the thirty-seven years since democratization in 1987. This chapter traces the process through which those capacities were built.

Historical Foundations of Democratic Resistance

For more than a quarter century before 1987, South Korea was governed by military-backed regimes. Major General Park Chung-hee seized power in a coup in 1961 and remained in power until he was assassinated by the head of his own intelligence agency on October 26, 1979. Martial law was declared the following day. In the months that followed—a period known as the "Seoul Spring"—many Koreans hoped that democracy was finally within reach. However, on December 12, 1979, Major General Chun Doo-hwan, commander of the Defense Security Command (the forerunner of the Defense Counterintelligence Command), led a mutiny within the army that enabled him and his allies to take control of the military. In the spring of 1980, as students and citizens took to the streets demanding democracy, the new military leadership extended martial law nationwide on May 17, arrested opposition leaders, and closed universities. The following day, the Gwangju Democratization Movement began (see box).

South Korea's current system of procedural democracy—centered on the direct election of presidents—was won through the June Democratic Uprising of 1987. Prior to that point, dictatorial governments suppressed popular resistance or confined it to limited forms. Student demonstrations within university campuses, prayer gatherings led by Catholic priests, and underground organizational activities were among the few available avenues of dissent. However, the situation reached a turning point when President Chun Doo-hwan (in power from 1980 to 1988) sought to suppress discussions of constitutional reform and maintain military rule. Citizens began taking to the streets on a scale unprecedented in Korean history.

The National Headquarters for the Promotion of a Democratic Constitution planned a symbolic action for the evening of June 10, 1987. At 6:00 P.M., the bells of Seoul Anglican Cathedral would ring, followed by automobile horns sounding throughout downtown Seoul. The regime's response paradoxically revealed the depth of its anxiety. The cathedral had been surrounded and effectively sealed off several days in advance, and drivers were threatened with arrest for traffic violations if they sounded their horns. Horns were physically removed from buses and taxis, while subway trains passed through major downtown stations without stopping. Schools shortened class hours, and workplaces instructed employees to leave early.

The Gwangju Democratization Movement of 1980

In May 1980, the people of Gwangju, a city in southwestern South Korea, rose up against a new military regime that had seized power following a coup the previous December. General Chun Doo-hwan and other military leaders had taken control of the government and imposed martial law across the country to suppress growing demands for democracy. On May 18, students in Gwangju began protesting against military rule. Paratroopers sent to the city brutally beat, bayoneted, and arrested protesters and other civilians, and the violence soon drew growing numbers of ordinary citizens into the streets. As the army continued its repression, the protest developed into a broad popular uprising.

On May 21, soldiers opened fire on a large crowd of unarmed civilians in front of the provincial government building, killing and wounding many people. After this massacre, some citizens obtained weapons from police stations and military reserve armories and formed armed groups to defend themselves and their city. The army was forced to withdraw from the city center, leaving Gwangju largely under the control of its residents for several days. During this period, citizens organized themselves to maintain public order, distribute food, donate blood, care for the wounded, and continue demanding an end to military rule. Although the city was surrounded and cut off from the outside world, ordinary people demonstrated a remarkable capacity for self-government and collective solidarity.

On May 27, the military launched a final assault on Gwangju and retook the city, killing many of those who remained in the provincial government building. The uprising lasted ten days and left hundreds dead and thousands wounded, arrested, or otherwise affected by military repression. The Chun regime subsequently portrayed the uprising as a violent riot instigated by North Korea and suppressed discussion of what had happened. But the people of Gwangju and activists across South Korea continued to demand truth and accountability. The memory of Gwangju became a powerful moral foundation of the country's democracy movement and helped inspire the nationwide democratic uprising of 1987. When South Koreans invoked Gwangju during the December 2024 martial law crisis and vowed that it "must never happen again," they were drawing on a deeply rooted memory not only of the brutality of military rule, but also of ordinary people coming together to defend democracy and govern their own community.

All of these measures were intended to suppress participation. Instead, they produced precisely the opposite effect. Even people who would otherwise have remained at home went out into the streets to see what was happening and found themselves standing alongside strangers who had come for exactly the same reason.

The demonstrations spread beyond Seoul after June 15 and expanded nationwide. They were particularly intense in Gwangju, where memories of the 1980 uprising and its violent suppression remained vivid. The death of university student Lee Han-yeol after being struck directly by a tear-gas canister became another catalyst for mobilization. An estimated 1.5 million people participated in nationwide demonstrations on June 18 demanding the abolition of tear gas.[1] The scale of the protests led the government to consider declaring martial law, although it ultimately refrained from doing so.[2]

The summer of 1987 also witnessed the beginning of the "Great Workers' Struggle,"[3] which substantially broadened the social foundations of civil society. Demonstrators also began to hold candles during this period, although candles were not yet the prime symbol of the movement and remained only one element among many.

The Rise of Candlelight Mobilization, 2002–2017

Candlelight vigils became the defining form of mass protest in South Korea in 2002. Following the deaths of two middle-school students who were killed by a U.S. military armored vehicle, an internet user known as "Angma" proposed holding a candlelight vigil. The idea spread through online bulletin boards and developed into large-scale street gatherings that brought citizens together without relying on existing organizational infrastructure.

The format established that year—a festive atmosphere in urban plazas near government buildings, real-time online broadcasting, and voluntary citizen participation—remained remarkably consistent in subsequent years.

1. Sung You-bo, "'That Was When I Knew.'"
2. MBC *PD Notebook*, "Military Coup 2."
3. Even after the direct presidential election system was adopted following the June Democratic Uprising of 1987, workers' demands were not fully reflected in the process of political democratization. Consequently, from July to September 1987, workers across the country formed their own labor unions and staged large-scale strikes and demonstrations to demand wage increases and better working conditions. Beginning with the struggles of workers at large conglomerates such as Hyundai Group and Daewoo Shipbuilding, the movement rapidly spread nationwide, drawing the participation of hundreds of thousands of workers. The government and corporations mobilized the police and violent "strike-breaking squads" to suppress the workers' struggles, labeling them as illegal and violent acts; in August, Daewoo Shipbuilding worker Lee Seok-kyu was killed after being struck by a tear gas canister during a protest. Although the scale of the struggle gradually diminished after September, the 1987 Great Workers' Struggle was a significant event that demonstrated that South Korea's democratization was not merely a matter of political institutional change, but also a process in which workers themselves demanded and organized to secure their rights and dignity.

Over the following decade, candlelight mobilizations recurred repeatedly (see table 2). For example, in 2004, citizens protested against the impeachment of President Roh Moo-hyun. In 2008, they opposed negotiations over U.S. beef imports. In 2009, they mourned the death of former President Roh Moo-hyun while protesting the Lee Myung-bak administration. In 2011, candlelight demonstrations emerged around the issue of university tuition fees.

Practical constraints also contributed to the persistence of this format. Until the Constitutional Court ruled otherwise in 2009, the Assembly and Demonstration Act prohibited outdoor gatherings at night. Candlelight vigils therefore occupied a legal gray zone, functioning not as officially recognized demonstrations but as forms of civic ritual.

The 2016–17 Candlelight Movement represented the culmination of this tradition. The movement maintained nonviolent discipline for months and coordinated a complex coalition of more than 1,500 civil society organizations[4] and opposition political parties, who united in their call for the removal of sitting President Park Geun-hye. She was the daughter of Park Chung-hee, the general who had seized power in 1961. The movement successfully pushed the parliament to impeach President Park, which was followed by a Constitutional Court ruling removing her from office. This was the first successful presidential impeachment and removal in Korean history.

The Candlelight Movement was an intergenerational encounter. The generation that had marched in 1987 stood alongside a younger generation educated in the values of that struggle, and the candle served as their shared symbol.

Although estimates of participation remain contested, organizers reported that approximately 1 million people gathered at the November 12, 2016, demonstration demanding Park Geun-hye's resignation; the number rose to about 1.9 million on November 26 and reached as many as 2.32 million at the December 3 demonstration, the movement's peak.[5] Six days later, on December 9, the National Assembly passed the motion to impeach President Park. Mobilization calling for her removal by the Constitutional Court continued thereafter, and across the movement's twenty-three rallies, cumulative participation exceeded sixteen million, according to organizer estimates.[6] Even based on conservative estimates, the scale of mobilization was historically unprecedented.

The organizational networks, tactical repertoires, and relational trust developed

4. Estimates of the coalition's size vary by point in time: it launched with roughly 1,500 member organizations in November 2016 and, by its dissolution in May 2017, described itself as a coalition of some 2,000 civil society organizations.
5. Lee Jae-ho, "Sixteen Million Candlelight Protesters."
6. Lee Jae-ho, "Sixteen Million Candlelight Protesters."

Table 2. Selected candlelight mobilizations in South Korea, 2002–17

Year	Trigger	Scale and significance
2002	Deaths of two middle-school students killed by a U.S. military armored vehicle	First mass candlelight vigils; organized online without existing organizational infrastructure
2004	Impeachment of President Roh Moo-hyun	About 70,000 in central Seoul on March 13, the day after the vote (press report); the Constitutional Court rejected the impeachment in May
2008	Negotiations over U.S. beef imports	About 500,000 in Seoul on June 10 (organizers; police: 80,000); vigils continued for more than three months, and the government renegotiated the import terms
2009	Death of former President Roh Moo-hyun; opposition to the Lee Myung-bak administration	The same year, the Constitutional Court ruled the blanket ban on nighttime outdoor gatherings incompatible with the Constitution; the ban lapsed in 2010
2011	University tuition fees	Nightly student-led vigils in central Seoul from May 29, which put tuition relief on the national agenda
2016–17	Demands for the removal of President Park Geun-hye	More than 1,500 organizations; about 1 million (November 12), 1.9 million (November 26), and 2.32 million (December 3) participants; more than 16 million across twenty-three rallies; Park impeached and removed

Note: Participation figures are organizer estimates unless otherwise noted.

Sources: Lee Jae-ho, "Sixteen Million Candlelight Protesters"; Yoon Ho-woo, "Give Us Back Our President"; Ryu Cheol-ho et al., "June 10 Candlelight Rally'"; Jeong Won-sik, "After Holding Back So Long"; chapter 1.

during this process did not disappear once the demonstrations ended. Instead, they remained available for future mobilization.

Rising Tensions Under the Yoon Suk Yeol Administration, 2022–2024

Following Park Geun-hye's removal from office, Moon Jae-in, the candidate of the liberal Democratic Party, won the snap presidential election held in May 2017 and served until 2022. In the March 2022 presidential election, Yoon Suk Yeol, a career prosecutor whom Moon had appointed Prosecutor General in 2019 but who resigned in 2021 following a dispute with the Moon administration, ran as the candidate of the conservative People Power Party. Yoon defeated the

Democratic Party's Lee Jae-myung by less than one percentage point.

Yoon Suk Yeol assumed office as the twentieth president of the Republic of Korea in May 2022, but his political position weakened rapidly. Within three to four months of taking office, his approval rating had fallen into the 20–30 percent range.[7] In the April 2024 parliamentary election, the opposition Democratic Party secured an overwhelming majority, effectively paralyzing the administration's legislative agenda. Various controversies involving both the president and the first lady further increased political pressure.

The labor movement was among the first parts of civil society to face hostility from the Yoon Suk Yeol government. In South Korea, labor unions have historically played an important role in the country's democracy movement, so attacks on unions were understood by many activists as part of a broader retreat from democratic rights. The government portrayed unions as entrenched interests and "privileged groups" rather than as legitimate partners in social dialogue. When the Cargo Truckers' Solidarity Union went on strike in 2022 over working conditions and transport fees, the government issued an emergency order requiring striking workers to return to work. It subsequently labeled construction unions "gangsters" and launched investigations targeting their activities. The government also required major unions to disclose extensive financial information and expanded investigations and searches targeting labor organizations. Labor groups condemned these measures as an effort to weaken unions and workers' collective power.[8]

In 2023, marking the first anniversary of the administration, seventy-three labor unions and civil society organizations jointly condemned the government, characterizing it as anti-labor, anti-democratic, anti-peace, anti-environmental, and pro-chaebol (business conglomerate).[9]

The administration also became known for its extensive use of the presidential veto power. Indeed, it exercised the veto more frequently than any government since the administration of Syngman Rhee (1948–60), making it a leading example of the abuse of presidential veto authority in Korean constitutional history.

Many constituencies that had awaited the passage of reform legislation subsequently organized themselves into a coalition called the "National Emergency Action to Reject the Veto" (hereafter "Emergency Action"). Through this network, specific grievances were accumulated, coordinated, and politicized throughout 2024. Researchers and scientists protested cuts

7. Bae Jae-sung, "Yoon's Approval Rating Drops Below 30%."
8. Jung Hyun-cheol, "Yoon Government's First-Year Labor Policy"; People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy, "Yoon Government Must Stop Its Hostility."
9. Cho Yeon-joo, "'One Year of Yoon Suk Yeol.'"

to national research and development funding. Farmers demanded stronger government responses to collapsing rice prices. Advocates for press freedom criticized government interference in public broadcasting. Movements also expanded around demands for an independent special prosecutor to investigate the death of Corporal Chae[10] and allegations of political interference in the subsequent investigation.

By late 2024, university campuses across the country were issuing declarations calling for the president's resignation. Broader political movements demanding a special investigation into First Lady Kim Keon-hee and advocating presidential impeachment also began to emerge.

Warnings about the possibility of martial law were likewise raised before December. In August 2024, opposition legislator Kim Byung-joo, a retired four-star general, publicly expressed concern that individuals loyal to the administration were being appointed to key military positions and that the nomination of Kim Yong-hyun as Minister of National Defense might signal preparations for emergency measures.[11]

On September 1, 2024, Lee Jae-myung, then leader of the opposition, stated in the National Assembly that he had received reports of plans to arrest and detain members of the National Assembly simultaneously in order to prevent legislators from voting to terminate martial law should it be declared.[12]

The ruling party dismissed these warnings as political attacks, and many within the opposition also regarded them as unrealistic. Most citizens likewise found such claims difficult to believe.

However, revelations that emerged after December 3 gave these warnings new significance. The operational manual governing martial law procedures (Martial Law Practical Manual) was reportedly revised on June 28, 2023, simplifying procedures so that the president and minister of national defense could declare martial law without a recommendation from the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of

10. "Corporal Chae" refers to Corporal Chae Su-geun, a South Korean Marine who died during an underwater search operation at a flood site in Yecheon, North Gyeongsang Province, in July 2023. Court proceedings later identified the immediate causes of the incident as reckless search orders issued by senior commanders and the failure to provide adequate safety equipment, leading to the prosecution and punishment of several officers. Colonel Park Jung-hoon became a prominent figure in the case after refusing orders from superiors to suppress the investigation into the marine's death and publicly exposing issues of command responsibility and alleged interference with the military investigation. He was acquitted of insubordination charges by a military court and, in September 2025, was recognized by the Ministry of National Defense as one of eleven service members commended for refusing unlawful or improper orders. In interviews conducted for the KBS interview series, attorneys representing Colonel Park consistently suggested that his example may have helped create the political and psychological conditions that contributed to some officers' and soldiers' reluctance to fully carry out orders during the martial law crisis.

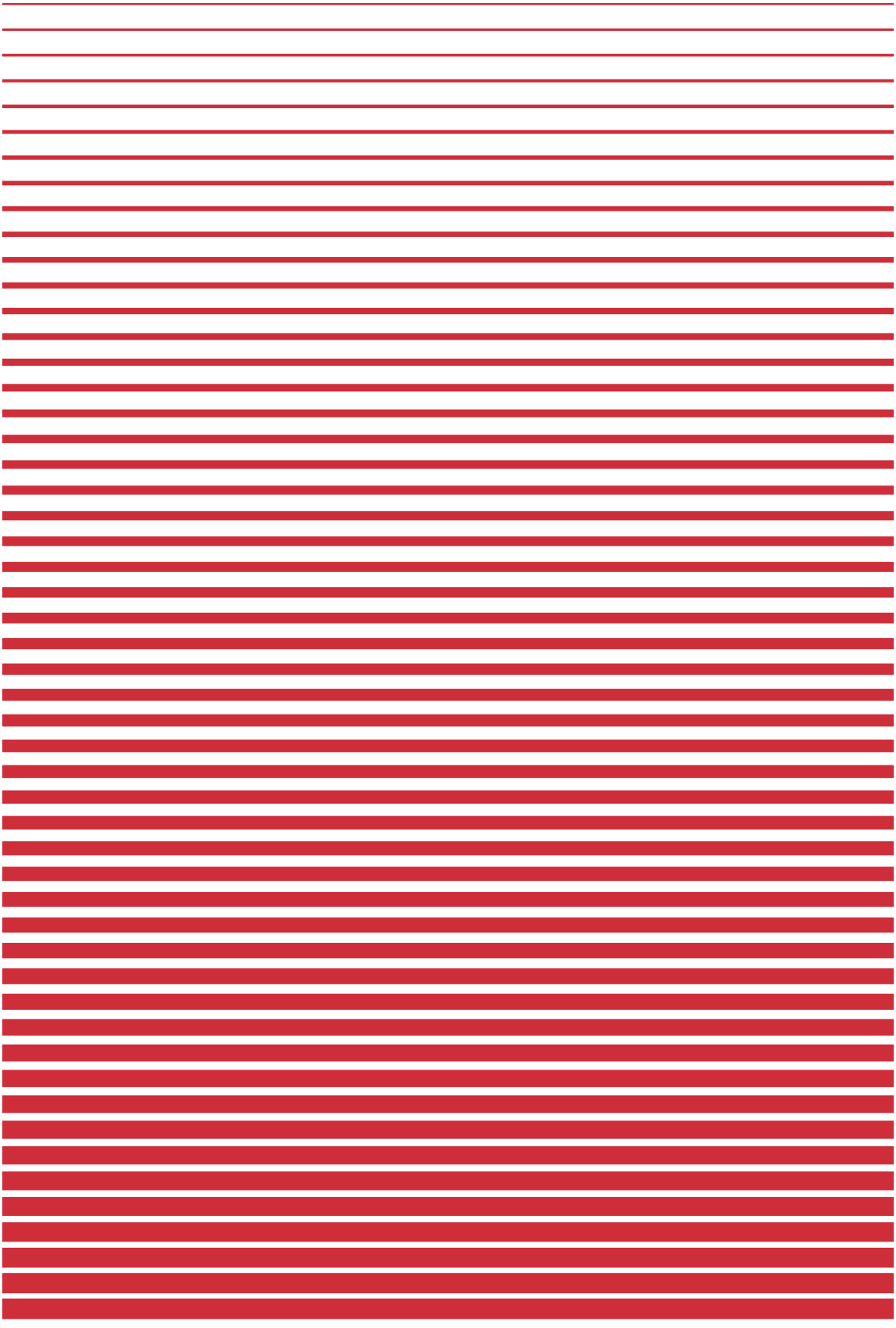
11. Kim Byung-joo, interview on *Kim Jun-il's News Plaza*.

12. Cho Hyun-ho, "Han Dong-hoon Urges Acceptance."

Staff.[13] Questions were also raised regarding whether the large-scale military parade held in downtown Seoul on Armed Forces Day, October 1, 2024, had served as a rehearsal for the deployment of military units within an urban environment.

What is clear is that when martial law was actually declared, citizens and civil society organizations already knew what needed to be done. That knowledge had been formed through decades of accumulated practice.

13. Kim Ju-hwan, "Martial Law Operations Manual Was Revised."



CHAPTER 2

SIX HOURS: THE UNFOLDING OF RESISTANCE ON DECEMBER 3

The six hours of December 3, 2024, provide the clearest illustration of how the accumulated capacities discussed above actually functioned in practice. Between 10:23 P.M. on December 3 and 4:27 A.M. on December 4, South Koreans demonstrated that a coup can be defeated in six hours. Research on coups suggests why it may need to be defeated that quickly: coups tend to consolidate—or collapse—within the first day or two, as those whose cooperation the coup requires decide which outcome to bet on.[1] The speed of popular anti-coup mobilization was therefore not incidental to the outcome; it was one of its causes. This chapter reconstructs those six hours chronologically in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the events.

Declaration of Martial Law (22:27)

At 10:23 P.M. on Tuesday, December 3, President Yoon Suk Yeol appeared on national television, and at about 10:27 P.M. he declared emergency martial law.[2] In the years prior, he had increasingly insinuated, without evidence, that his opposition in parliament was influenced or infiltrated by North Korea. In his six-minute martial law declaration speech on December 3, he used that claim to justify his actions, referring to the "threat posed by North Korean communist forces" and the need to "immediately eradicate the unscrupulous pro-Pyongyang anti-state forces that pillage the freedom and happiness of our people and to protect free constitutional order."[3] To supposedly defend constitutional order, he had ordered its core institutions suspended.

Immediately following the declaration, the police deployed five mobile units around the National Assembly under the stated objective of maintaining safety and public order.[4] The National Assembly Security Service also began restricting lawmakers' access to the parliamentary complex.[5] At the same time, martial law troops were dispatched to the National Election Commission (NEC), and later seized and controlled the NEC training institute in Suwon.[6] Emergency meetings were convened across government ministries, including the National Police Agency and the Ministry of Economy and Finance.[7] A Martial Law Command was established within the Ministry of National Defense

1. Naunihal Singh views the success or failure of a coup not in terms of the sheer size of the military force or the moral legitimacy of the forces suppressing it, but rather as "coordination games within the military" centered on the flow of information and the formation of self-fulfilling expectations within the military itself. See Singh, *Seizing Power*.
2. Constitutional Court of Korea, Decision 2024Heon-Na8, which finds that Yoon began his address at about 10:23 P.M. and declared martial law at about 10:27 P.M. Some news reports place the declaration at about 10:28 P.M.
3. The full Korean text of the address is reproduced in Constitutional Court of Korea, Decision 2024Heon-Na8, attachment 3, 111–13.
4. Shin Hyeong-cheol, "Nine Months of Planning."
5. Shin Hyeong-cheol, "Nine Months of Planning."
6. Lee Yu-min, "National Election Commission Says."
7. Woo Han-sol, "Cho Ji-ho Convenes Emergency Meeting."

compound at Yongsan Garrison, and at 11:23 P.M. Martial Law Command Proclamation No. 1 (hereafter Proclamation No. 1)[8] was issued, suspending constitutional order through prohibitions on political activities, introduction of media censorship, and measures targeting the medical sector.[9] The Central Government Complex in Sejong was closed, and access by civil servants was blocked.[10]

After 11:40 P.M., multiple Republic of Korea Army UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters arrived above the National Assembly.[11] On board were personnel from the Defense Counterintelligence Command and Special Warfare units, including teams tasked with arrests.[12] Military forces led by the Capital Defense Command began mobilizing for the purpose of neutralizing the National Assembly.[13] Armed troops equipped with night-vision goggles advanced as far as the first-floor anteroom outside the plenary chamber.[14] CCTV footage later captured indications that attempts were made to detain the leaders of both parties and the Speaker of the National Assembly.[15] Around the same time, the military notified all personnel scheduled for discharge that their separation from service would be indefinitely postponed, regardless of rank or status.[16]

Civilian Mobilization at the National Assembly

Following Yoon's declaration of martial law, many citizens initially reacted with shock and confusion. Messages began flooding the group chat of the Steering

8. Martial Law Command, *Proclamation No. 1*; see Appendix.
9. Park Eung-jin, "Martial Law Command Set Up."
10. Kim Nam-hyeong, "Government Complex Sejong Gates Closed."
11. Seo Ju-hee, "Black Hawk Helicopters Hover."
12. Jeong Hui-wan and Sim Jin-yong, "Yoon Suk Yeol Personally Ordered Military Commanders."
13. Kim Gi-seong, "Tracking the Movements of 1,600 Military Personnel."
14. Kim Ji-seong, "Armed Martial Law Troops Airlifted."
15. The failure of the arrest attempt was not due to an inability to locate the target, but rather to a combination of various factors. Some field commanders did not fully carry out the orders they received. Commander Kwak later testified that he had determined the order to drag lawmakers out of the main assembly hall was illegal, so he did not carry it out and instructed his troops not to issue live ammunition. His conduct that night, however, was not a simple act of refusal. Commander Kwak was subsequently indicted on charges of involvement in the insurrection; during the trial, he was the only defendant among the commanders to admit his guilt, while requesting the court to show leniency toward his subordinates. On September 21, 2026, the trial court sentenced him to nine years' imprisonment. The court found that he had conspired in advance to impose martial law and played a leading role in efforts to prevent the National Assembly from voting to lift it. However, the court reduced his sentence in recognition of his early cooperation with the investigation, including his voluntary surrender and submission of a written statement, as well as the consistency of his subsequent testimony. What can be stated with certainty is limited in scope. Specifically, at the decisive moment, his choice restricted the use of violence—he did not authorize the use of live ammunition, nor did he forcibly remove lawmakers from the plenary hall. The troops deployed to the building showed little willingness to engage in combat, and the citizens waiting outside delayed the military's entry long enough for the lawmakers to gather and vote to nullify the declaration of martial law. On Kwak's testimony, see Hong Hye-jin, "Opposition Says Troops Took 180,000 Live Rounds"; on the verdict, see Choi Hye-rin, "Yeo In-hyeong Sentenced to 18 Years."
16. Jang Yun, "Active-Duty Soldier Reports."

Committee of World Without War, the organization where I work. Responses included "What on earth is happening?" "I'm completely stunned too...," "It's not even April Fool's Day," "What happens if martial law is declared?" and "Can the National Assembly reject it?"[17] These reactions vividly captured the disbelief and uncertainty of the moment.

Soon afterward, however, social media posts began circulating that identified a constitutional mechanism for overturning martial law. One widely shared post, written by former Justice Party lawmaker Jang Hye-young, quoted Article 77(5) of the Constitution in full and concluded by urging Speaker Woo Won-shik to convene an emergency plenary session immediately to revoke what she described as an absurd declaration.[18] The provision was not obscure. Three months earlier, when opposition leaders warned that martial law was being prepared (see Chapter 1), the media had explained that the National Assembly could demand its lifting by a majority vote, in which case the president would be constitutionally obligated to comply.[19]

At 10:49 P.M., Lee Jae-myung, then leader of the opposition Democratic Party, began a livestream in which he characterized Yoon's declaration as an illegal, unconstitutional, and anti-people act. The broadcast attracted approximately 170,000 simultaneous viewers.[20]

Lee Jae-jung (MA candidate in social welfare at Chung-Ang University), who arrived at the scene shortly thereafter, recalled that the initial gathering was very small.[21]

Yet after 11:00 P.M., the pace of civilian mobilization accelerated exponentially. Park Eun-jung (National Assembly member of the Rebuilding Korea Party and former inspector general of the Ministry of Justice), who arrived at approximately 11:29 P.M., later stated:

> When I got to the National Assembly, there were already a lot of citizens there... The taxi driver even asked me, "Is there some event at the National Assembly tonight?"

Her account underscores that within just one hour of the declaration, a crowd large enough to attract the attention of uninvolved observers had already formed, numbering in the thousands and still climbing toward its overnight peak.[22]

17. World Without War Steering Committee group chat messages (Participants A–H; anonymized identifiers used and informed consent obtained), December 3, 2024. Quotations are reproduced with participants' permission. Original records and consent documentation are retained by the author.
18. Jang Hye-young, Facebook post, December 3, 2024.
19. Park So-yeon and Kim Seong-eun, "Lee Jae-myung's Claim of 'Martial Law Preparations.'"
20. Park Jae-ryeong, "Lee Jae-myung Went Live."
21. Lee Jae-jung, KBS interview.
22. Park Eun-jung, KBS interview. Although the exact number of participants has yet to be confirmed,

Table 3. Estimated number of people in Yeouido, night of December 3–4, 2024

Time	Estimated population
10:00 P.M., December 3	65,269
After midnight, December 4	67,945
1:00 A.M., December 4 (peak)	69,979
November average, Tuesdays at 1:00 A.M.	53,469

Note: Figures include lawmakers, aides, journalists, police, and soldiers as well as citizens.
Source: Seoul Metropolitan Government "living population" estimates, as reported in Son Deok-ho, "On the Night Martial Law Was Declared."

This initial mobilization emerged through the interaction of political leadership and spontaneous civic initiative. Choi Hwa-sik (38th class of the Korea Military Academy and retired army brigadier general) recalled how dramatically the crowd swelled as the night went on.[23]

Mobile-phone data bear this out (table 3). "Living population" estimates published by the Seoul Metropolitan Government put the number of people in Yeouido—the island on which the National Assembly stands—at an ordinary 65,269 at 10:00 P.M. Instead of falling, as it normally does late at night, the figure climbed to 67,945 after midnight and peaked at 69,979 at 1:00 A.M., just before the Assembly voted: some 16,500 more than the November average for a Tuesday at that hour (53,469). The figure also counts lawmakers, aides, journalists, police, and soldiers, but media reports estimated that more than 10,000 of those present were citizens who had come to the Assembly.[24]

Those who came were not confined to any political faction or social group. Every generation was present, from students in their twenties to retirees in their seventies; among the oldest were people with living memories of Gwangju in 1980 and of 1987, who stayed through the night in resolve that the past must not be repeated.[25] Residents of Seoul and Gyeonggi Province, arriving by car and taxi, came first, but others traveled from Dangjin, Cheongju, Gyeongsan, and Gwangju, some for hours,

the estimates by time period presented below indicate that the number of protesters was rising most rapidly when Park arrived. Within about an hour, the crowd had grown so dense that it blocked military vehicles and troops attempting to approach the National Assembly Main Building.
23. Choi Hwa-sik, KBS interview.
24. Son Deok-ho, "On the Night Martial Law Was Declared."
25. KBS interviewees included, among those in their twenties and thirties, Song Young-gyeong, Park Sun-woo, Hong Ye-rin, Yu Ha-young, Shin So-hyeon, Choi Hee-yoon, and Kwon Maro; in their forties and fifties, Ahn Bo-ram, Oh Jong-gil, and Kim Gyu-hyun; and aged sixty and above, Jo Young-joo, Hong Won-gi, Baek Kyung-jin, and Kwon Min-seong. Full citations for the KBS *Geunal Geugot* interviews appear in the References.

while Koreans abroad followed and shared developments through the livestreams.[26] Nor were they only activists: professors, lawyers, doctors of Korean medicine, web developers, journalists, workers, small-business owners, and students all came, as did members of marginalized groups such as the disability-rights activist Lee Hyeong-suk.[27] Some came as couples or as parents with their children—a detail that, as the next chapter shows, mattered for how people found the courage to go at all.

Parliamentary Resistance and the Vote to Lift Martial Law (01:00)

Immediately after the declaration of martial law, the opposition Democratic Party issued an emergency summons to all of its lawmakers at 10:42 P.M., and members of the National Assembly began converging on parliament.[28] Securing the quorum required for a vote (151 members) became the highest priority.[29]

Resistance was not limited to the opposition. Some members of President Yoon's People Power Party (PPP) also opposed the destruction of constitutional order and joined the effort. Eighteen PPP lawmakers chose to head to the National Assembly rather than follow instructions directing them to party headquarters, and party leader Han Dong-hoon, who did not hold a seat in the Assembly, also went there.[30]

Park Sang-soo (former PPP spokesperson, chair of the PPP's Seo-gu Gap district committee in Incheon, and attorney) criticized the passivity of some members of his own party, stating:

> It is cowardly for lawmakers to remain at party headquarters instead of defending the National Assembly.

He remained at the scene, sharing information with citizens as events unfolded.[31]

At approximately 12:27 A.M., intense confrontations erupted as martial law troops attempted to enter the National Assembly complex. Personnel from the Army Special Warfare Command sought to force their way inside.[32] According

26. Interviewees from the capital region included Hwang In-gyeong, Jo Ye-chan, Seok Min-ju, Hwang Pu-ha, Lee Ji-hoon, and Kim Do-young; those from other regions included Hong Won-gi (Dangjin), Jo Young-joo (Cheongju), and Han Il-hwan (Gyeongsan). See also comments by @Malena79 and @Baekdusan-f5u and, from abroad, by @hyunsooklim2894 and @crisprcas9711 in Lee Jae-myung's livestream chat.
27. Interviewees included professionals and intellectuals (Lee Sin-chul, Seok Min-ju, Kim Gyu-hyun, Park Sang-soo, Ahn Bo-ram, and Lee Yong-seon); media professionals (Ko Na-rin, Raphael Rashid, and Ota Narumi); workers and small-business owners (Hong Won-gi, Kim Do-young, Lee Ji-hoon, Oh Jong-gil, and Yoon Hyun-joo); students (Park Sun-woo and Choi Bo-geun); and the disability-rights activist Lee Hyeong-suk. Full citations appear in the References.
28. Jeong A-yeon, "Democratic Party Orders Emergency Recall."
29. Park Eun-jung, KBS interview; Han Ji-a, KBS interview.
30. Han Dong-hoon, KBS interview; Kim Jong-hyeok, KBS interview.
31. Park Sang-soo, KBS interview.
32. Yang Nak-gyu, "Which Martial Law Troops Entered the National Assembly?"

to testimony later given by Kwak Jong-geun, commander of the Army Special Warfare Command, before the National Assembly's Special Committee, President Yoon personally telephoned him sometime between 12:30 and 12:40 A.M. and instructed him:

> It seems the quorum has not yet been reached.
>
> Break down the doors quickly, get inside, and drag out the people who are in there.[33]

At approximately 12:41 A.M., more than 150 lawmakers—the number required to lift martial law—had successfully reached the plenary chamber.[34]

At 1:01 A.M., the National Assembly adopted a resolution demanding the termination of martial law.[35] All 190 lawmakers present voted in favor. The resolution passed unanimously just 155 minutes after martial law had been declared.

After transmitting the resolution, lawmakers remained inside the National Assembly while awaiting an official announcement from the presidential office lifting martial law.[36]

Withdrawal of Military Forces (04:27)

At approximately 1:10 A.M., Speaker Woo Won-shik emphasized that the resolution had been passed and publicly declared:

> The military and police personnel within the National Assembly grounds should leave immediately.

Troops positioned around the Assembly building soon began withdrawing from the main parliamentary complex.[37] Helicopters also departed shortly afterward.[38] Martial law forces that had entered the National Election Commission likewise began to withdraw around the same time.[39]

Despite the National Assembly's demand, defiance of the Constitution from within the executive branch continued. Around 2:00 A.M., the Ministry of National Defense announced that the Martial Law Command would remain in operation,[40] while the presidential office reportedly considered rejecting the Assembly's demand through a presidential veto-like interpretation.[41]

Facts that were not publicly known at the time have since emerged. The trial court in

33. National Assembly Secretariat, minutes of the Special Committee, 3rd meeting, January 14, 2025.
34. Kim Jin, "Over 150 Members of the National Assembly."
35. Kwak Woo-shin, "Emergency Plenary Session."
36. Go Han-sol et al., "'190 Present, 190 Votes in Favor.'"
37. Lee Hyun-joo and Gong Byeong-seon, "Emergency Martial Law Must Be Lifted Immediately."
38. Jeong Bong-oh, "Helicopter Lands at the National Assembly."
39. Jo Da-un, "Martial Law Troops Also Entered."
40. Kim So-ra, "Martial Law Command Will Remain in Place."
41. Hong Young-jae, "'Presidential Veto.'"

the first-instance proceedings against Yoon on charges of leading an insurrection later recognized that he had planned a second (and further) declaration of martial law after neutralizing the National Assembly.[42] Meanwhile, the second comprehensive special investigation into the December 3 insurrection allegations reportedly uncovered indications that Yoon sought the deployment of additional military forces through the Joint Chiefs of Staff.[43]

By approximately 4:00 A.M., however, the emergency mobilization order at the Ministry of National Defense headquarters was lifted.[44] At 4:22 A.M., the Martial Law Command announced that the forces deployed earlier in the night had been ordered to return to their original units.[45]

At 4:27 A.M., President Yoon announced that the military would be withdrawn in accordance with the National Assembly's demand and declared that the emergency martial law order would be lifted immediately.[46]

At 4:55 A.M., all military personnel stationed at the Speaker's official residence in Hannam-dong had also withdrawn.[47]

42. Kim Ji-eun, "Court Recognized the Possibility." In its ruling, the trial court noted that Yoon Suk Yeol had instructed officials to block the National Assembly from passing a resolution to lift martial law, stating to the effect that "even if the resolution passes, we can simply impose martial law a second or third time, so proceed as planned." The court acknowledged that even after the National Assembly passed the resolution to lift martial law at 1:01 A.M. on December 4, 2024, Yoon Suk Yeol was planning to impose additional martial law after neutralizing the National Assembly.
43. Ryu Cheong-hui, "Additional Troops After the Lifting of Martial Law?"
44. Kim Su-ho, "Ministry of National Defense Lifts Emergency Mobilization Order."
45. Kwak Hee-yang, "Deployed Troops Have Returned."
46. Kim Tae-in, "Martial Law Will Be Lifted."
47. Kim Jong-hoon, "'1:58 A.M. on December 4.'"

CHAPTER 3

HOW WAS RESISTANCE ORGANIZED?

The sequence of events and the diversity of participation described in the previous chapter were not the product of chance or spontaneous reaction alone. The ability of thousands of citizens to converge on the National Assembly in the middle of the night, despite profound uncertainty about the outcome, and to contribute to the neutralization of martial law within six hours, was the result of capacities accumulated over a long period of time.

This chapter analyzes how two layers of anti-militarist infrastructure operated simultaneously to make such rapid resistance possible: an external infrastructure consisting of social movement networks and multilayered communication channels, and an internal infrastructure encompassing democratic historical experience and a sense of civic sovereignty.

Internal Infrastructure: Historical Memory, Constitutional Literacy, and Civic Sovereignty

The remarkable cohesion demonstrated by South Korean civil society after the declaration of martial law was more than an outburst of anger. It reflected the immediately activated potential, at a critical moment, of an internal infrastructure that had been accumulated over decades.

This internal infrastructure consisted of three interconnected dimensions: *historical memory*, which transformed historical trauma into a source of action; *constitutional literacy*, which grounded resistance in legal legitimacy; and a sense of *civic sovereignty*, through which citizens understood themselves as the ultimate guardians of the state.

Historical Memory and Anti-Coup Sensibilities

Historical memory transformed past tragedies into collective learning and a shared strategic map for confronting a contemporary crisis.

Almost immediately after hearing news of martial law, citizens invoked memories of earlier periods of authoritarian rule. Comments such as "Martial law belongs to the Fifth Republic of the 1980s"[1] and "Is this 1987? Another Seoul Spring?"[2] appeared in online discussions.

1. @Dalnara Tokkaengseu, live chat on Lee Jae-myung's YouTube livestream, approximately 10:50 P.M., December 3, 2024. Numerous comments expressing similar sentiments were also identified. Full chat log dataset archived by the researcher (collected March 22, 2026).
2. @polaris_mylife4148, comment posted after Lee Jae-myung's YouTube livestream, approximately 12:30 A.M., December 4, 2024. Similar comments appeared throughout the dataset. Comment dataset archived by the researcher (collected February 8, 2026). For an account of the "Seoul Spring" and the events of 1979–80, see Chapter 1. The question "Is this another Seoul Spring?" frames the current situation as an attempt by the military to seize power, similar to the events of 1979–80, and expresses concern that history might repeat itself. This memory was particularly vivid in 2024: the film *12.12: The Day* (2023)—whose Korean title is literally *Seoul Spring* (서울의 봄)—dramatizes the December 12 military insurrection and, released about a year before the declaration of martial law, sold more than 13 million tickets (roughly a quarter of the population), reviving this history in the public consciousness across generations.

These were not simply acts of remembrance. They became expressions of collective determination, captured in statements such as "We must never allow this to become another Seoul Spring."[3] The resolve not to repeat past failures became a powerful defensive mechanism that drew citizens into the streets.

One citizen wrote:

> Everyone should remember the enormous debt we owe to Gwangju. Back then there were no livestreams and no breaking-news alerts. How could people walk toward gun barrels and confront them? Without that history, today would not exist either.[4]

This comment illustrates how historical memory functioned as a powerful trigger for action, producing not only reflection but also a physical impulse to respond.

The sharing of these memories created a psychological foundation that enabled citizens, without formal organizational training, to arrive at immediate strategic judgments. Appeals such as "There must never be a second Gwangju. We cannot retreat. Gwanghwamun, Yongsan, Yeouido…"[5] reflected how collective memory provided guidance for action.

The final findings released on December 15, 2025, by the Special Prosecutor's Office investigating the December 3 martial law episode suggest that these public intuitions were not merely exaggerated fears. According to the investigation, preparations for emergency martial law measures had begun "before October 2023 for the purpose of monopolizing and maintaining power," while efforts were undertaken to "create conditions for close coordination with the military command structure," including the intentional relocation of the presidential office to Yongsan.[6] The trial court in Yoon's insurrection case did not accept, on the evidence before it, that preparations had begun before October 2023. Other findings, however, show that they began well before the conspiracy took its final shape in November 2024. Another panel of the same court found that immediately after Kim Yong-hyun became defense minister in September 2024, he began preparing the tasks of intelligence agents for a martial law scenario and, with Yoon's approval from the start, ordered a military operation intended to provoke North Korea and so create the emergency that a declaration of martial law required.[7] Citizens' instinctive concerns therefore

3. @moikunkun-k6i, live chat on Lee Jae-myung's YouTube livestream, approximately 10:55 P.M., December 3, 2024. This sentiment was widely echoed in the dataset.
4. @owner575, comment posted after Lee Jae-myung's YouTube livestream, approximately 1:40 A.M., December 4, 2024. This sentiment was widely echoed in the dataset.
5. @Kkum Yeohaeng-d1s, comment posted after Lee Jae-myung's YouTube livestream, approximately 11:30 P.M., December 3, 2024. Similar comments appeared throughout the dataset.
6. Jeong Dae-yeon and Lee Chang-jun, "Relocation of the Presidential Office to Yongsan."
7. Seoul Central District Court, Judgment 2025Gohap129, 731; Seoul Central District Court, "Explan-

represented an accurate response to a genuine threat rather than an overreaction.

Constitutional Literacy and the Legitimation of Resistance

Constitutional knowledge, held by some participants and spread quickly, helped establish the legal legitimacy of resistance in real time.

Only eighty seconds after Lee Jae-myung's livestream began, viewers directly cited Article 77(5) of the Constitution in the chat.[8]

The provision states:

> When the National Assembly demands the lifting of martial law by a majority of its members, the President must comply.

This constitutional clause provided citizens with a rational basis for understanding their gathering not as a protest, but as an act of defending the Constitution.

Information continued to circulate:

> A majority of National Assembly members must gather in the Assembly and demand the lifting of martial law in order for it to end, but the fxxking police are currently blocking access to the Assembly entrances.[9]

The circulation of constitutional knowledge enabled citizens to define the situation clearly as an instance of unlawful martial law and to understand why physically protecting access to the National Assembly was necessary.

Civic Sovereignty and Democratic Agency

An internalized sense of civic sovereignty, expressed in the phrase "Sovereignty resides in the people," completed the foundation of resistance.

Throughout Lee Jae-myung's livestream chats and comment sections, participants repeatedly declared that "The people are the sovereign authority of the Republic of Korea"[10] and "The people are the source of power."[11]

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atory Statement," Case 2025Gohap1511, 2, 5. Because the case involved classified military information, the indictment was not disclosed, the trial was closed to the public, and the full judgment is not expected to be released.

8. @Real Keukeuk, live chat on Lee Jae-myung's YouTube livestream, approximately 10:50 P.M., December 3, 2024. Numerous comments expressing similar sentiments were also identified.

9. @ewe-e1c, comment posted after Lee Jae-myung's YouTube livestream, approximately 12:50 A.M., December 4, 2024. This sentiment was widely echoed in the dataset.

10. @Chwimi Buja Gopa, live chat on Lee Jae-myung's YouTube livestream, approximately 10:52 P.M., December 3, 2024. Numerous comments expressing similar sentiments were also identified. @600 Meters, comment posted after Lee Jae-myung's YouTube livestream, approximately 2:00 A.M., December 4, 2024. Similar comments appeared throughout the dataset.

11. @Ting-z2j, live chat on Lee Jae-myung's YouTube livestream, approximately 10:50 P.M., December 3, 2024. Numerous comments expressing similar sentiments were also identified.

Table 4. Keyword counts in comments on Lee Jae-myung's YouTube livestream, December 3–4, 2024

Measure	Real-time chat before the Assembly vote	Comments posted after the livestream ended
References to the National Assembly ("to the National Assembly")	607	745
First-person declarations of action	202	744
References to Gwangju or May 18	3	58

Note: Counts in the first and third rows are of chat lines (real-time) or comments (post-stream) containing the Korean keywords 국회로 ("to the National Assembly") and 광주, 5·18 or 518 (Gwangju, May 18), including common misspellings and excluding usernames. First-person declarations of action are the author's own count.
Source: Author's analysis of the Lee Jae-myung YouTube Channel livestream chat (12,372 entries) and post-stream comments (12,184 entries).

This sense of sovereignty also shaped attitudes toward state security forces. Soldiers were not primarily viewed as enemies to be defeated. Rather, they were described as "our servicemembers who protect the people"[12] and as individuals who had been "used by those giving orders and who themselves deserve protection."[13]

Lee Jae-myung's livestream lasted approximately twenty-three minutes, from 10:49 P.M. to 11:12 P.M. on the night of the declaration.

Among roughly 12,400 real-time comments posted more than an hour before the National Assembly vote—and before anyone knew how events would unfold—the phrase "to the National Assembly" appeared in 607 of them. There were 202 first-person declarations of action, while only 3 directly referenced Gwangju or the May 18 Democratic Uprising.

In comments posted after the livestream ended and the crisis continued, these figures increased to 745 references to the National Assembly, 744 first-person declarations of action, and 58 references to Gwangju and May 18 (table 4).

This pattern suggests that during the first twenty-three minutes of the crisis, participants focused primarily on immediate decisions and action rather than historical reflection. Only as they committed themselves to action and began moving toward the National Assembly did they increasingly situate their behavior within a broader historical context. Historical

12. @Kim Dae-ok-x2i, comment posted after Lee Jae-myung's YouTube livestream, approximately 11:50 P.M., December 3, 2024. This sentiment was widely echoed in the dataset.
13. Choi Jin-young, KBS interview.

memory was therefore not simply a precondition for action; it was activated simultaneously with action itself.

The Operation of External Infrastructure: Organizational Networks and Immediate Mobilization

The defense of South Korean democracy during the martial law crisis depended not only on citizens' internal motivations but also on dense organizational networks built during ordinary times and a multilayered system capable of activating them in real time. The structural backbone of resistance was an external infrastructure capable of deploying resources and mobilizing citizens through preexisting and routinized pathways.

Existing Coalitions and Organizational Networks

This infrastructure was not improvised from scratch. Rather, it represented the activation of trust accumulated by civil society during the years following the inauguration of the Yoon Suk Yeol administration.

These trust-based networks were rapidly converted into systems for transmitting instructions and coordinating action. They took organizational form in coalitions such as the National Action for Resignation of Yoon Suk Yeol (hereafter National Action), which began operating around May 2023, and the Emergency Action, established in December 2023 to coordinate opposition to government policies.[14]

Lee Ji-hyun recalled:

> The Emergency Action already had momentum. Preparation had already been done.[15]

Her observation underscores the importance of preexisting networks.

The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) provides a particularly striking example of how sophisticated organizational structures built during ordinary times can generate extraordinary mobilization speed during crises.

Eom Mi-kyung explained that the KCTU had long maintained a system combining "horizontal" networks of sixteen industrial federations and "vertical" networks of sixteen regional headquarters.[16] Officials responsible for linking these structures and implementing organizational tasks had been systematically organized in advance, making it possible for instructions to be transmitted and executed even under emergency conditions.[17]

14. Eom Mi-kyung, interview. Unless otherwise noted, all interviews cited in this report were conducted by the author, audio-recorded and documented with the interviewee's consent; original transcripts are archived by the author.
15. Lee Ji-hyun, interview.
16. Eom Mi-kyung, interview.
17. Eom Mi-kyung, interview.

Immediately after the declaration of martial law, KCTU President Yang Kyung-soo issued an emergency directive:

> All comrades who can do so should move quickly and gather at the main gate of the National Assembly.[18]

Through this horizontal-and-vertical network, the directive spread almost instantly to workplaces and regional branches across the country.[19] The KCTU's response did not stop at mobilization to the site. At around 1:00 A.M., as the quorum to lift martial law was being secured inside the chamber, the confederation's leadership convened an emergency Central Committee meeting in a tent at the protest encampment outside the National Assembly. There they resolved that if martial law were not immediately lifted, the KCTU would launch a general strike—a decision issued at once as "Struggle Directive No. 1" and transmitted in real time through the same horizontal and vertical networks to some 5,000 affiliated unions and sixteen regional headquarters. Before declaring it, the leadership confirmed by telephone with representatives of major workplaces, including Hyundai and Kia, and essential public-service sectors such as health care, that an immediate walkout was actually feasible. The threat was therefore not rhetorical: it signaled that the cost of sustaining the coup would rise sharply and immediately if the Assembly's decision were defied.[20] The existence of this professional infrastructure made rapid field-level mobilization possible.

A Multilayered Call-to-Action System and Digital Mobilization

The activation of this existing infrastructure depended upon a multilayered call-to-action system in which institutional, organizational, digital, and interpersonal channels reinforced one another.

Through his YouTube livestream, Lee Jae-myung repeatedly appealed:

> Citizens, please come to the National Assembly now.

These direct appeals provided the public with a clear and immediate objective.[21] Amid uncertainty and confusion, the livestream functioned as a kind of digital command center, generating real-time momentum.

At the same time, National Assembly Speaker Woo Won-shik utilized National Assembly Broadcasting equipment to deliver a public address and prepare for the opening of the plenary session despite attempts by military units to enter the Assembly grounds. In doing so, he fulfilled

18. Cho Yeon-joo, "KCTU Issues Emergency Directive."
19. Eom Mi-kyung, interview.
20. Eom Mi-kyung, interview.
21. Han Jun-ho, KBS interview.

an institutional summons designed to activate constitutional procedures.[22]

These institutional calls were reinforced by organizational guidance from civil society groups. The People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD), for example, convened an emergency executive committee meeting via Zoom after the crisis began and established a three-tier emergency system to prepare for possible leadership disruption.[23]

Meanwhile, the organizations that would go on to form BISANG Action on December 11—1,549 at its launch and later more than 1,700—reactivated their nationwide networks under the principle of "minimum common program, maximum coalition."[24]

Relational Infrastructure: Transforming Fear into Action

During the six hours of resistance, the approximately 155 minutes between the declaration of martial law and the National Assembly's vote to lift it were particularly significant. During this period, individuals were forced to make rapid decisions under conditions of extreme uncertainty and perceived physical danger.

Their decisions emerged through the interaction of organizational agility, interpersonal trust that transformed fear into courage, and digital verification that confirmed the reality of unfolding events in real time.

Relational ties frequently transformed fear into a sense of shared responsibility. The case of Song Hwa, who operated a clothing business, and her husband, Heo Woo-jin, who worked in trade, illustrates this dynamic. After hearing news of martial law, the couple repeatedly asked one another:

> Are we really going? Are we actually going? I'm really going. I'm getting ready.[25]

They later acknowledged that either, if alone, might have remained immobilized by fear. Because they were together, however, they found reassurance in each other's presence and headed to the National Assembly wearing only padded jackets over their pajamas.

Kim Han-min-young, a campaigner with Amnesty International Korea and with World Without War, traveled to the National Assembly and there met her mother, who had participated in democracy movements during the 1980s. Seeing her mother arrive fully prepared reassured her. She later recalled thinking:

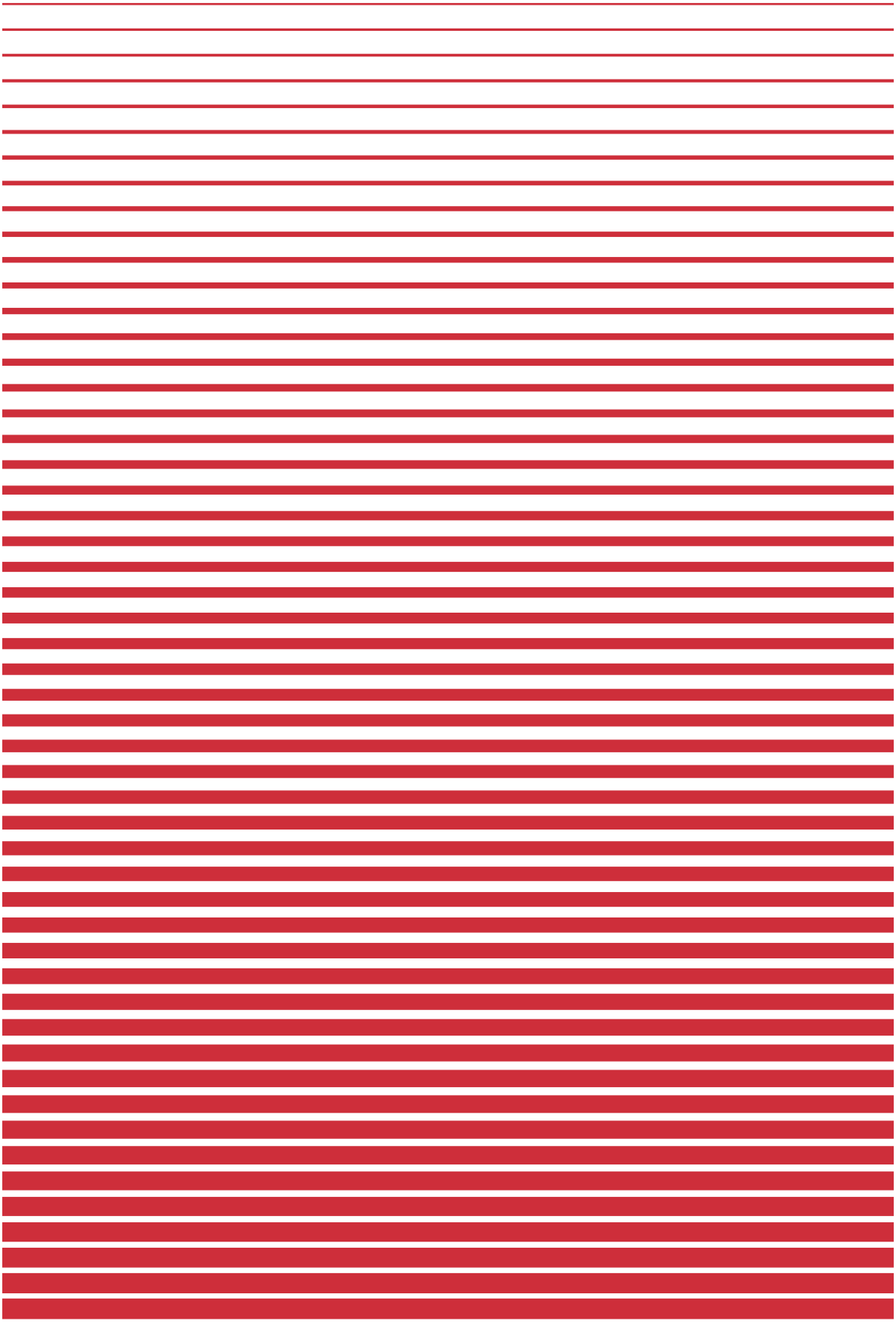
> Experienced people really are different. Someone with martial law experience is incredible.

22. Hwang Yuk-ik, KBS interview.
23. Lee Ji-hyun, interview.
24. Lee Ji-hyun, interview.
25. Song Hwa and Heo Woo-jin, KBS interview.

At that moment, she said, "my focus returned."[26]

The son of former Democratic Party lawmaker Park Yong-jin, upon learning that his father had already headed to the National Assembly, secretly left home to join him at a protest.[27] The episode illustrates how democratic values and a sense of civic responsibility can be transmitted across generations through family relationships.

26. Kim Han-min-young and Han Jae-yong, KBS interview.
27. Park Yong-jin, KBS interview.



CHAPTER 4

TACTICS AND STRATEGIC CHOICES

The failure of the state's repressive apparatus and the success of civilian resistance cannot be explained simply by numerical superiority. Rather, they resulted from the combined effect of highly effective tactics deployed rapidly in real time. Through physical obstruction, contests over legitimacy, real-time synchronization, and the maintenance of nonviolent discipline, resistance actors undermined the operational effectiveness of martial law forces from within. Chenoweth, Perkoski, and Kang argue that the cooperation of security forces is decisive both in the initiation of repression and in the ultimate success or failure of a campaign.[1]

One caveat frames the analysis that follows. As of this writing, the criminal proceedings arising from the December 3 events have not concluded, and the individual conduct, orders, and intentions of specific commanders remain contested in court.[2]

Spatial Occupation and Physical Obstruction

At the National Assembly perimeter and in front of the main Assembly building, citizens did more than chant slogans. By physically occupying key spaces and blocking the movement routes of military and police forces, they impaired the practical implementation of state violence.

Blocking Military Vehicles Through Human Barriers

Citizens physically stood in front of military buses and tactical vehicles attempting to enter the National Assembly grounds. Kim Dong-hyun, an activist with the youth tenants' rights organization Minsnail Union, stepped directly in front of military vehicles belonging to the 1st Special Forces Airborne Brigade near Seogang Bridge and forced them to stop. Other citizens immediately joined him, lying beneath vehicle wheels or surrounding the vehicles to prevent further movement.[3]

Buying Time for Institutional Resistance

These acts of physical obstruction created crucial time for members of the National Assembly to enter the chamber and exercise their voting rights. Citizens helped legislators overcome police barricades, lifting them over walls while urging them to "get inside quickly and lift martial law." These actions became a critical factor in securing the quorum necessary for the vote.[4]

1. Chenoweth, Perkoski, and Kang, "State Repression and Nonviolent Resistance."
2. This report treats as established only what the Constitutional Court's ruling and the Ministry of National Defense's formal commendations have confirmed. Accounts of particular commanders' actions that rest on trial testimony are presented as contested rather than settled, and soldiers' reluctance in the field is described as citizens observed it, not as a claim about any individual's inner motive.
3. Kim Dong-hyun, KBS interview; Sébastien Falletti, KBS interview; National Assembly Secretariat, minutes of the Special Committee, 7th meeting, February 6, 2025.
4. National Assembly Secretariat, minutes of the Special Committee, 7th meeting. Lee Jae-jung, KBS

Impairing Command Decisions

The excessive crowding of citizens also imposed constraints on the officers commanding the operation. Commander Kwak later testified before the National Assembly's National Defense Committee that he had determined a forced entry would not only result in numerous casualties but also subject his troops to criminal liability; consequently, he ordered his troops to halt their advance and remain in place.[5] However, the trial court subsequently found that Kwak had played a leading role in the attempt to prevent the parliamentary vote, illustrating how a commander could exercise restraint at a critical moment while simultaneously participating in the operation.[6]

Going beyond the statements of individual officers, the Constitutional Court determined the reason why the orders were not carried out. The Court found that the soldiers did not carry out the orders they received because the people they faced were not enemies but ordinary citizens, and they could not actively use force against them.[7] Furthermore, the Court held that the decision to refrain from using live ammunition and the withdrawal of troops were not based on the president's instructions, but rather were decisions made by the soldiers themselves after assessing the situation.[8]

Dual Defensive Line

Spatial defense also emerged through an organic "dual defensive line" linking citizens outside the Assembly with aides and staff members inside. While legislators attempted to reach the chamber and prepare for a legal vote, parliamentary aides and Assembly staff formed a physical shield protecting the main building and plenary hall from martial law forces.

Kim Won-i, a member of the National Assembly and former parliamentary aide, and other experienced personnel drew upon lessons learned during the era of so-called "animal parliament" confrontations—a derisive nickname the Korean media gave to episodes in which legislative standoffs turned into physical brawls inside the Assembly.[9] They summoned individuals with more than ten years of Assembly experience and constructed substantial barricades using cafeteria tables, sofas, chairs, and other furniture stacked across entry points.

Party staff members, including Democratic Party spokesperson Ahn Gwi-ryeong, physically confronted armed martial law troops in front of the Assembly building.[10]

interview. Baek Hye-ryeon, KBS interview.
5. Lee Eun-gi, "'Revelations' and 'Confessions' of the Martial Law Forces."
6. Choi Hye-rin, "Yeo In-hyeong Sentenced to 18 Years."
7. Constitutional Court of Korea, Decision 2024Heon-Na8, 52–53.
8. Constitutional Court of Korea, Decision 2024Heon-Na8, 54.
9. Kim Won-i, KBS interview.
10. Ahn Gwi-ryeong, KBS interview.

Whenever troops attempted to enter through broken windows or underground passages, aides formed human chains and pushed them back while shouting, "The National Assembly is not a place for soldiers."[11] When members of the 707th Special Mission Group attempted to restrain journalists with cable ties, parliamentary aides and party staff intervened and strongly protested, preventing the action.[12] National Assembly security officers and administrative staff also asserted that "security of the main building is our responsibility" and actively blocked military entry attempts.[13]

Scaling Walls to Secure the Vote

Because the objective of lifting martial law through a parliamentary vote was clear, legislators took advantage of openings created by physical resistance and spatial occupation. Park Chan-dae, then floor leader of the Democratic Party, succeeded in entering the Assembly grounds by climbing over a poorly secured wall between Gates 2 and 3, losing one shoe in the process.[14] National Assembly Speaker Woo Won-shik likewise climbed over a wall to enter the Assembly complex and preserve parliamentary authority.[15] Lim Kwang-hyun was initially blocked by police but succeeded in crossing the wall after citizens prevented police interference and physically helped lift him over.[16]

Even after entering the Assembly grounds, Lee Jae-myung feared becoming a target for an arrest team. Assisted by legislators including Boo Seung-chan and Lee Hae-sik, he initially hid in a relatively secluded office.[17] Later, as military helicopters landed and troop deployments intensified, he moved to a wooded area near the clock tower and remained concealed until the decisive moment when a quorum had been secured, at which point he entered the plenary chamber.[18]

Protecting Parliamentary Infrastructure

Because voting in the National Assembly is conducted electronically, personnel responsible for maintaining parliamentary infrastructure played an essential role in ensuring that the system continued to function despite military interference. Lee Gwang-bok, a director at Daeshin Information & Communications, and other technical staff were initially blocked by police but entered the Assembly grounds with the assistance of citizens.[19] They activated voting terminals and restored

11. Ryu Sam-young, KBS interview; Lee Hae-min and Jeong Hee-jeong, KBS interview.
12. Yoo Ji-woong, KBS interview.
13. Ahn Bo-ram, KBS interview.
14. Park Chan-dae, KBS interview.
15. Woo Won-shik, KBS interview.
16. Lim Kwang-hyun, KBS interview.
17. Han Jun-ho, KBS interview.
18. Han Jun-ho, KBS interview; Lee Hae-sik, KBS interview.
19. Lee Gwang-bok, KBS interview.

the electronic display system, providing the material foundation that allowed the successful vote to be broadcast live to the nation and the world.[20]

Kim Min-ki, secretary general of the National Assembly, telephoned the police commander responsible for security and warned that "history will judge you if you do not lift the blockade," while working to secure access routes for additional legislators.[21] At his direction, National Assembly Broadcasting personnel transmitted the entire plenary session live, guaranteeing the public's right to know and placing additional pressure on the martial law authorities.[22]

Contesting Legitimacy and Creating Doubt Within the Military

Citizens treated soldiers not as enemies to be defeated but as fellow citizens who could be persuaded. This approach contributed to the psychological erosion of willingness within military units to execute orders.

Moral and Emotional Appeals

Citizens repeatedly appealed to soldiers' personal identities and emotions. They asked, "Don't you have parents too?" and told them, "I am the mother of a soldier. Please don't do this."[23] One citizen gently touched a soldier's helmet while emphasizing familial bonds. Such interactions created psychological barriers that made it more difficult for heavily armed soldiers to use force against civilians.[24]

Invoking Legal and Historical Responsibility

Citizens also reminded soldiers of their personal responsibility. Statements such as "You should refuse this order" and "If you enter, you will become a criminal in the eyes of history" were directed at individual troops.[25] Legal professionals present on site explained that the situation constituted an unlawful act of insurrection and warned that obedience to illegal orders would not absolve individuals of responsibility.[26]

Noncooperation and Selective Compliance

The Constitutional Court concluded that the reason the National Assembly was able to pass the resolution to lift martial law so quickly was a combination of two factors: resistance from citizens and selective

20. Woo Won-shik, KBS interview; Lee Gwang-bok, KBS interview.
21. Kim Min-ki, KBS interview.
22. Woo Won-shik, KBS interview; Kim Min-ki, KBS interview.
23. Hwang In-gyeong, KBS interview; Kim Chang-gyu and Choi Mi-jeong, KBS interview.
24. Kim Chang-gyu and Choi Mi-jeong, KBS interview; Woo Won-shik, KBS interview.
25. Choi Jin-young, KBS interview; Jeong Gu-seung, KBS interview; Baek Young-min, KBS interview; Park Geon, KBS interview.
26. Jeong Gu-seung, KBS interview; World Without War, "Reject Martial Law"; Citizens' Coalition for an Open Military, "Lift the State of Emergency Martial Law!"

compliance and noncooperation within military and police ranks.[27]

This passive attitude was evident at various stages, as confirmed by the court's ruling. Cho Seong-hyun,[28] commander of the First Security Group of the Capital Defense Command, deemed the mission assigned to him unjustified; he therefore ordered the soldiers who had already entered the National Assembly grounds to assemble in an unoccupied area, and instructed the follow-up units still en route not to cross the Seogang Bridge but to stand by.[29] Forty-nine military investigators dispatched by the Defense Counterintelligence Command waited outside the National Assembly's perimeter wall and withdrew en masse once the resolution was passed.[30] The police, too, after receiving complaints about blocking lawmakers' entry, recognized the National Assembly's constitutional authority to demand the lifting of martial law and, judging that the declaration of martial law alone was insufficient grounds, began allowing regular visitors to the National Assembly back in after verifying their identities;[31] National Police Agency Commissioner Cho Ji-ho[32] refused to assist the Defense Counterintelligence Commander in locating key political figures.[33]

In response to this kind of refusal and act of self-restraint, the Ministry of National Defense officially commended eleven service members in September 2025 for refusing unlawful or improper orders.[34]

However, acts of passive disobedience were not uniformly regarded as honorable. Although the Constitutional Court acknowledged that such actions had contributed to the lifting of martial law, the Ministry of National Defense continued to investigate the conduct of individual soldiers; some soldiers were even subjected to criminal investigations or disciplinary proceedings on suspicion of, for example, being implicated in preparations for a second declaration of martial law. The motives and legal and administrative status of certain individuals remain unclear.[35]

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27. Decision 2024Heon-Na8, 78.
28. Cho's actions that night were confirmed by a ruling of the Constitutional Court. Subsequently, following a second investigation by the Special Prosecutor, he was charged with playing a leading role in the insurrection, and his case is currently being heard in court.
29. Decision 2024Heon-Na8, 45–46.
30. Decision 2024Heon-Na8, 48–49.
31. Decision 2024Heon-Na8, 47.
32. Although Cho refused this specific request, he was not a member of the resistance movement. As Commissioner General of the National Police Agency, he ordered that access to the National Assembly be blocked, and he has been indicted for his role in carrying out martial law operations. Like other commanders here, his trial for these actions is currently underway.
33. Decision 2024Heon-Na8, 48–49.
34. Ryu Jae-min, "'We Were Deployed Under Martial Law.'"
35. Yoon Jin, "Defense Minister on Reports of Disciplinary Action."

Digital Media and Real-Time Synchronization

Digital networks connected otherwise dispersed citizens in real time and weakened the information monopoly traditionally associated with repression.

Real-Time Coordination

Lee Jae-myung's YouTube livestream served as a real-time mobilization platform, providing citizens with a clear destination and actionable guidance.[36] Many participants later explained that watching the broadcast convinced them that "even one more person can help defend democracy," prompting them to head immediately toward the National Assembly.[37]

Shared Situational Awareness and Error Correction

Through platforms such as X and Telegram, information about troop movements, attempts to enter the Assembly building, and helicopter landings circulated second by second.[38] Parliamentary aides inside the Assembly photographed helicopters landing and troop movements visible from windows and relayed this information to legislators inside the chamber.[39] At one point, confusion arose when a fire extinguisher used by parliamentary staff was mistaken for a smoke grenade by the troops. However, real-time reports from citizens and aides quickly corrected the misinformation, helping maintain an accurate understanding of events.[40]

Monitoring Repression and Citizen Journalism

Citizens carrying smartphones and camcorders deliberately positioned themselves as witnesses.[41] The constant presence of cameras reminded soldiers that their actions were being broadcast to the entire nation, creating a psychological restraint on the use of force.[42]

Linking the Street and the Institution

Developments inside the plenary chamber were immediately communicated to citizens outside through livestreams.[43] This reinforced an understanding of strategic division of labor: "We must hold

36. Cheon Jun-ho, KBS interview; Ahn Bo-ram, KBS interview. @mokiWook, comment posted after Lee Jae-myung's YouTube livestream, approximately 3:00 P.M., February 22, 2025. Numerous comments expressing similar sentiments were also identified. @Malena79, comment posted after Lee Jae-myung's YouTube livestream, approximately 11:30 P.M., January 16, 2025. This sentiment was widely echoed in the dataset.
37. Song Young-gyeong, KBS interview; Kim Dong-hyun, KBS interview.
38. Eom Mi-kyung, interview; Hwang In-gyeong, KBS interview; Yang Kyung-soo, KBS interview.
39. Park Eun-jung, KBS interview; Lee Hae-min and Jeong Hee-jeong, KBS interview; Baek Hye-ryeon, KBS interview.
40. Park Sang-soo, KBS interview; Ryu Sam-young, KBS interview.
41. Park Shin-dong, KBS interview; Park Geon, KBS interview.
42. Lee Sin-chul, KBS interview; Jo Soo-min and Jeon Min-je, KBS interview.
43. Choi Jin-young, KBS interview; Hwang Yuk-ik, KBS interview.

our position here so that legislators can complete the vote."[44] In this way, institutional resistance and street-level resistance became mutually reinforcing.

Nonviolent Discipline and the Failure of Repression

The strict nonviolent discipline maintained by citizens deprived martial law authorities of any opportunity to portray resistance as a riot and thereby justify the use of force. Chenoweth, Perkoski, and Kang, in their review of research on state repression and nonviolent resistance, note a broad scholarly consensus that state repression is less effective against highly organized nonviolent movements.[45] When organizational capacity and preparedness are present, state violence can produce what scholars describe as "political jiu-jitsu" or "backfire" effects, in which repression strengthens rather than weakens resistance. Brian Martin, who systematized the concept of backfire, argues that movements can increase the likelihood of such outcomes through their own preparation and actions.[46]

The South Korean case demonstrates how civic consciousness combined with digital technology can cause the state's physical coercive power to lose the contest for moral legitimacy and instead become fuel that intensifies resistance.

Nonviolent discipline did not mean the complete absence of physical contact. As discussed earlier, citizens stood in front of military vehicles, lay down in their path, formed human chains by linking arms, and lifted lawmakers over the walls. Inside the National Assembly building, staff members stacked furniture to construct barricades, pushed back soldiers attempting to enter through broken windows, and used fire extinguishers to impede their advance.

Although these actions involved physical force, they were not intended to cause harm. Rather than striking their opponents, participants sought to block their movement, restrain their advance, and protect others. From the perspective of civil resistance studies, these actions are better understood not as violence but as forms of nonviolent intervention—actions that involve placing one's body or objects in an opponent's path to obstruct or disrupt their operations.[47] Because the boundary between the two was not always clear in the heat of the moment, participants repeatedly reminded one another to avoid escalation, as the following case illustrates.

44. Han Jun-ho, KBS interview; Park Chan-dae, KBS interview.
45. Chenoweth, Perkoski, and Kang, "State Repression and Nonviolent Resistance."
46. Martin, *Justice Ignited*.
47. Gene Sharp divided the methods of nonviolent action into three broad classes—protest and persuasion, noncooperation, and nonviolent intervention—the last of which includes physically placing one's body in the way, as in nonviolent interjection, obstruction, and occupation. See Sharp, *Politics of Nonviolent Action*.

Strategic Restraint

Oh Il-nam, a broadcasting and performance director who participated in the resistance while carrying a South Korean flag, repeatedly warned fellow protesters:

> If we try to push through, we will give them a justification.[48]

He encouraged participants to surround military forces with larger numbers rather than attempt physical assaults, emphasizing "reasonable resistance" instead of escalation.

Even during tense confrontations at the main entrance of the National Assembly Main Building, citizens frequently attempted to calm emotions, telling one another:

> Let's stop for a moment. Let's take a break.[49]

Defining Soldiers and Police as Subjects of Protection and Persuasion

Citizens viewed the soldiers not as enemies to be defeated, but as fellow citizens who had been exploited by state power. Choi Jin-young, who was facing off against heavily armed troops in front of the National Assembly Main Building, viewed them not as attackers but as citizens bound by orders, stating, "The soldiers standing here also deserve protection, just like Corporal Chae."[50] This characterization removed soldiers from the role of potential threats and served as a psychological barrier that made it difficult for armed forces to use physical force against civilians.

At the same time, citizens clearly distinguished between individual soldiers and those who issued the orders. After hearing about the circumstances of the soldiers who had taken a passive stance, Ahn Gwi-ryeong emphasized that the fault lay not with the soldiers but with those who had caused citizens to turn their guns and knives against one another, and that responsibility must be held by them.[51]

The citizens' disciplined restraint demonstrated that nonviolence was not merely the absence of force but a sophisticated strategy for claiming moral superiority.

Maintaining Order and Protecting Safety

Participants also engaged in extensive efforts to maintain order and prevent accidents. Individuals who had never met before formed human walls by physically supporting one another.[52] Near a hydrogen fueling station, citizens created a solid human chain to prevent dangerous

48. Oh Il-nam, KBS interview.
49. Lee Yong-jin and Lee Yong-seon, KBS interview.
50. Choi Jin-young, KBS interview.
51. Ahn Gwi-ryeong, KBS interview.
52. Baek Young-min, KBS interview.

confrontations.[53] Had participants resorted to uncontrolled violence, military commanders could have attributed responsibility for injuries to the crowd and justified a forcible advance. The disciplined maintenance of order effectively eliminated that option. In the end, the restraint displayed by military forces was conditioned in significant part by citizens' appeals to legitimacy and their commitment to nonviolent discipline.

53. Jo Soo-min and Jeon Min-je, KBS interview.

CHAPTER 5

WHY THE SELF-COUP FAILED

The question with which this report began—how a self-coup, broadcast live and backed by armed troops, collapsed within six hours—can now be answered. Neither luck nor the spontaneous action of an unorganized crowd adequately explains it. The reversal of December 3 was the work of an anti-militarist infrastructure accumulated through decades of democratic struggle and activated under extreme time pressure.

This infrastructure consisted of two mutually reinforcing layers. The internal layer was composed of historical memory, constitutional literacy, and a sense of civic sovereignty that led citizens to see themselves as the ultimate guardians of the state. The external layer consisted of social movement networks, multilayered communication channels, and institutionalized mechanisms of solidarity. Chapters 2 to 4 showed both layers activated at once on the night of December 3. Democracy can be eroded gradually by elected leaders, but the events of December 3 in South Korea represent a case of acute rupture, in which democratic erosion rapidly escalated into an attempted self-coup. This report's contribution to the study of civil resistance lies in explaining what enabled society to reverse that rupture under conditions of extreme urgency.

Yet citizen resistance alone cannot fully explain the outcome. As Chapter 4 showed, the Constitutional Court explicitly recognized in its ruling that the rapid termination of martial law resulted from the interaction between civic resistance and the passive implementation of orders by military and police personnel.[1] While senior commanders largely complied with unlawful directives,[2] many field-level officers delayed, minimized, or in some cases openly refused their implementation. This passivity was not simply a matter of individual goodwill. Two things converged. One was the presence of the citizens themselves: as the Constitutional Court found, soldiers held back because the people in front of them were not enemies but ordinary citizens (see Chapter 4). This is the side of backfire that Gene Sharp called political jiu-jitsu, in which an order to use force against unarmed people erodes the loyalty of those told to carry it out.[3] The other was memory: some of those ordered to act remembered where such orders had led before. One trial court made the same point in its own words, attributing the outcome in part to "some soldiers and police officers who, recalling the dark memory of past insurrections in Korean history, resisted

1. Decision 2024Heon-Na8, 78.
2. For a discussion of how norms of unconditional obedience from the authoritarian era persist within the South Korean military, see Kim, "Institutions and Path to Democratic Control." These norms help explain why senior commanders generally obeyed unlawful martial law orders. From a historical institutionalist perspective, Kim argues that personal connections and patronage networks, legal and cultural norms enforcing obedience, and the lack of education on democratic values remained as institutional legacies even after democratization.
3. Sharp, *Politics of Nonviolent Action*.

unlawful orders or, when they had no choice but to follow them, took part only passively."[4]

The outcome also depended on institutional actors—opposition parties and members of the National Assembly—acting in alignment with the mobilization on the streets rather than at cross-purposes with it. Lawmakers who scaled the walls of the Assembly to reach the chamber, the Speaker who convened the plenary session under military pressure, and the citizens who held the perimeter so that the vote could proceed were engaged in a single, coordinated effort across the institutional and non-institutional divide. It was the alignment of these two forms of pressure—not either one alone—that proved decisive. In this sense, democracy was defended not only by civil society, but also by democratic norms accumulated within the state itself.

Two other explanations are often offered, and both deserve a direct answer. The first is that the coup failed simply because it was poorly planned and executed. There is some truth in this, and the court that tried Yoon emphasized it. It found that the helicopters carrying special forces had not been positioned in advance and did not reach the Assembly until 11:49 P.M., and that the planners had made a "serious miscalculation": they had not anticipated that, late on a Tuesday night, many Assembly staff would still be at work inside the main building.[5] Yet the operation was no half-hearted gesture. Courts have found that preparations began at least three months earlier, when the newly appointed defense minister, with Yoon's approval, ordered a military operation meant to provoke North Korea into creating the emergency that martial law required, and that the conspiracy took concrete shape at a dinner with key commanders on November 9, 2024. On the night itself, a counterintelligence commander ordered fourteen people arrested, among them the Speaker, the opposition leader, and the leader of the ruling party itself.[6] More importantly, the miscalculation the court identified was a failure to foresee resistance. It was those staff who barricaded the doors and pushed back soldiers trying to enter (see Chapter 4), and the court itself found that the resistance of Assembly staff and citizens kept the troops from sealing the building or reaching the chamber, and kept the arrest teams out of the grounds.[7] Another panel of the same court, refusing to treat the insurrection's brevity as grounds for leniency, put it more directly: it had ended within hours "above all" because of "the courage of the people who defended the National Assembly with their bare bodies against armed martial law troops."[8] Poor execution and resistance cannot be neatly

4. Judgment 2025Gohap1219, 121.
5. Judgment 2025Gohap129, 711–12.
6. "Explanatory Statement," Case 2025Gohap1511, 2, 5; Judgment 2025Gohap129, 16, 79.
7. Judgment 2025Gohap129, 76, 92, 713.
8. Judgment 2025Gohap1219, 121.

separated; much of the poor execution was an effect of the resistance.

The second explanation points to division within the ruling bloc. Eighteen People Power Party lawmakers went to the Assembly rather than to party headquarters and joined the vote to lift martial law; their party leader, Han Dong-hoon, who did not hold a seat, also opposed the declaration that night—and his own name was on the arrest list. Their defection mattered, but less for the arithmetic than for what it signaled. The 172 other lawmakers present already exceeded the 151 votes needed, so the resolution would have passed without them;[9] what their presence showed was that the coup lacked support even within its own camp, a point taken up below. Division in the ruling party became decisive only later, when impeachment required a two-thirds majority, and it widened as mobilization grew: at least twelve ruling-party lawmakers voted for impeachment on December 14, after the first vote had failed and the crowd outside the Assembly had roughly doubled (see Chapter 6). In both moments, elite division did not arise independently of the streets; it followed them.

This perspective also changes how we understand the significance of speed. The six-hour duration does not merely indicate that the coup was reversed quickly; speed was itself one of the mechanisms of reversal, and it operated along two paths.

The first concerns legitimacy. The success of the self-coup depended on transforming a manufactured threat into a genuine state of emergency. The invocation of "anti-state forces" in the martial law declaration could only acquire legitimacy if time allowed it to solidify into a perceived crisis. The speed of resistance deprived the coup's architects of that opportunity.

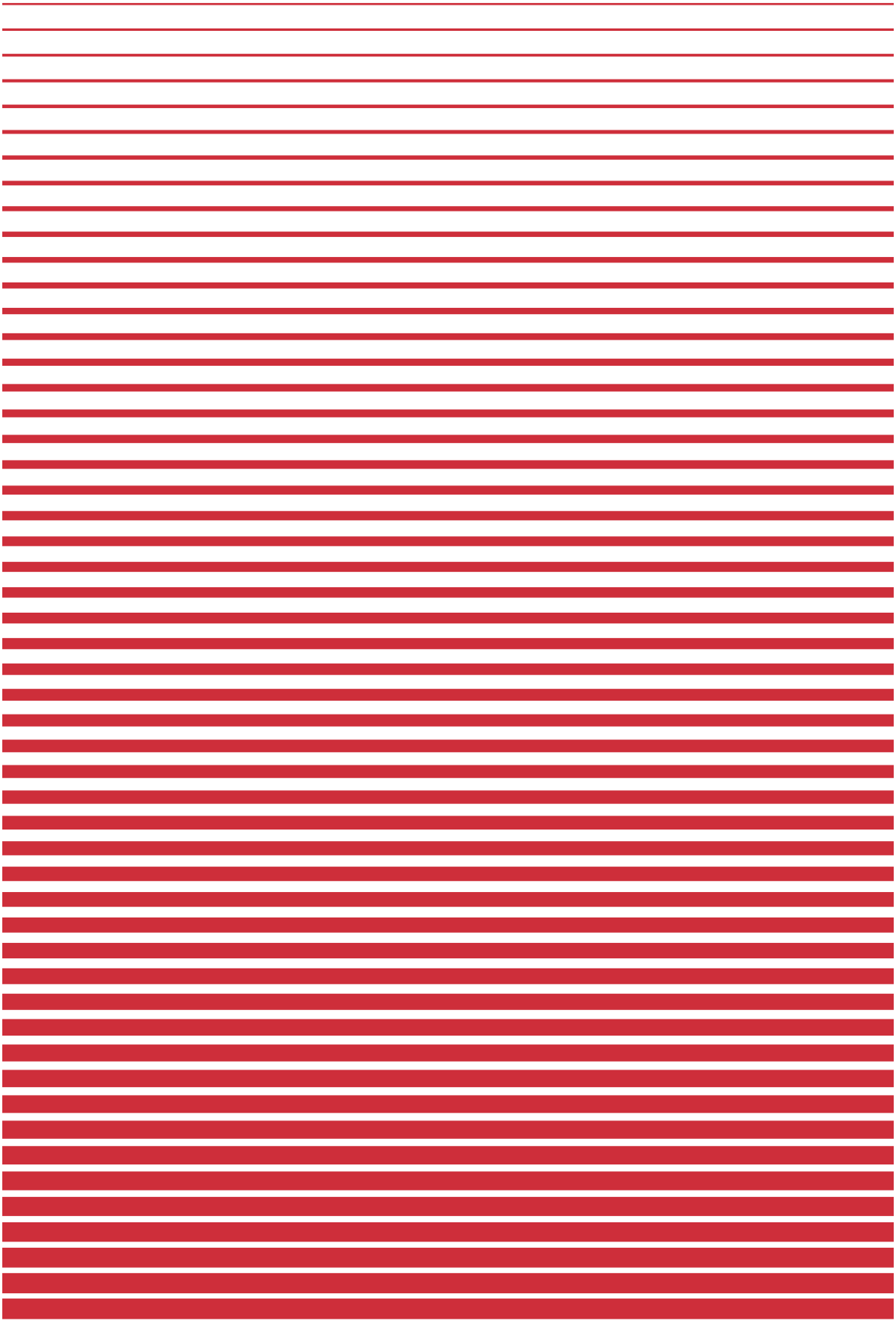
The second concerns expectation. A coup's success depends heavily on what those whose cooperation it requires—soldiers, commanders, officials, and political actors—believe its outcome will be. The passive acceptance of many other groups in society, including businesses, civil servants, labor unions, civil society institutions, and everyday people across various sectors of the economy, can also play a powerful role in whether a coup succeeds or fails.[10] For many people—both within and outside of the government—the decisive question in the moment is less whether the declaration is lawful than which side is likely to prevail, and they tend to resolve that question within the first day.[11] Rapid, visible mobilization casts doubt on any expectation that the coup will succeed. When citizens filled the streets around the National Assembly

9. Judgment 2025Gohap129, 103.
10. On how noncooperation and defection across a regime's pillars of support—well beyond the military itself—can defeat coups, see Zunes, *Civil Resistance Against Coups*; and Sharp and Jenkins, *Anti-Coup*.
11. On coup outcomes as coordination games driven by self-fulfilling expectations within the military, see Singh, *Seizing Power*.

within the hour, and when opposition lawmakers converged on the chamber rather than dispersing, the impression of an inevitable outcome never formed. The clearest sign that these expectations were shifting came from within the coup's own support base: the eighteen ruling-party lawmakers who went to the Assembly instead of party headquarters. As even those on whom the coup had relied for its success began to act as though it were destined to fail, the impression that the coup was inevitable crumbled. It is telling that this did not require citizens to believe they would win; as Chapter 3 showed, most acted without any assurance of success. What mattered was that their visible, rapid action denied the coup's architects the appearance of inevitability on which the cooperation of others depended.[12]

It is difficult to contemplate the alternative. Had the mobilization been delayed by even a single day, the impression that the coup had succeeded might already have taken hold. Without a swift and visible public response, the soldiers who hesitated in front of the civilian crowd might have carried out their orders after all. In other words, they would have sealed off the National Assembly, detained opposition leaders, and paved the way for a period of authoritarian rule. As in the past, South Korea would have eventually emerged from that shadow, but no one can say how much time, sacrifice, and suffering it would have taken to navigate that process.

12. For a discussion of the mechanisms by which large-scale, visible nonviolent mobilization causes a breakdown in loyalty among the regime's pillars of support, see Chenoweth and Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works*.



CHAPTER 6

SUSTAINING RESISTANCE: FROM MARTIAL LAW TO IMPEACHMENT

(DECEMBER 2024–APRIL 2025)

The organization of resistance and tactical choices discussed in the previous chapters appeared, at first glance, to conclude with the lifting of martial law. In reality, however, resistance did not end. Rather, the broad solidarity forged during six hours of crisis became the foundation for the impeachment movement that continued over the following four months. This chapter traces how the momentum generated during the initial crisis was sustained and transformed into institutional outcomes, demonstrating how anti-militarist infrastructure expanded beyond short-term crisis response into a longer process of democratic defense.

Mass Mobilization After December 3

Although martial law was lifted in the early hours of December 4, citizens were not satisfied with that outcome alone. Those who had gathered in front of the National Assembly in sub-zero temperatures immediately shifted toward sustained and organized action.

As soon as daylight broke on December 4, the heads of South Korea's major mass organizations—too pressed for time to assemble a formal coalition—gathered at Gwanghwamun Square in central Seoul at 9:00 A.M. and jointly declared a nationwide campaign of "comprehensive resistance." Those who spoke represented the breadth of organized civil society: the KCTU and the peasants' league, women's and anti-poverty organizations, environmental and legal groups (including Lawyers for a Democratic Society), Protestant and YMCA bodies, the Military Human Rights Center, student and progressive-party representatives, and the umbrella Civil Society Organizations Network that included the PSPD. Condemning Yoon's declaration as an unconstitutional insurrection, they demanded his removal from office and announced that citizens would now enter a phase of full-scale resistance for popular sovereignty.[1] That such a declaration could be assembled within hours—without time to build a formal coalition—reflected the density of the networks already in place.

Beginning that evening, they organized daily candlelight demonstrations in city centers. The resistance wasn't confined to the plaza. Organized labor also lent its strength on the job. The KCTU declared an indefinite general strike until Yoon Suk Yeol stepped down,[2] and in response, a series of strikes followed: rolling two-hour stoppages per shift by the Korean Metal Workers' Union (KMWU), a strike by the Railway Workers' Union, and a strike by non-regular school workers.[3]

1. Kim Seong-min, "Civil-Society Groups Condemn 'Unconstitutional Martial Law'"; Korean Women's Associations United, "Declaration of a Nationwide Emergency Action."
2. The KCTU declared that it would launch an indefinite general strike until Yoon Suk Yeol steps down. This marked the first indefinite general strike in twenty-eight years, since the 1996–97 general strike to block the rushed passage of the Labor Act. Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, "KCTU's 'History-Changing' Indefinite General Strike."
3. The KMWU issued a directive to halt work for two hours each during the day and night on December

Starting on December 6, the demonstrations moved to the area in front of the National Assembly under the slogan "Immediate Impeachment of Yoon Suk Yeol, the Ringleader of Insurrection!" and continued as daily candlelight rallies. While these actions reproduced the protest repertoire of the 2016–17 impeachment movement, they also reflected responses to a new and urgent crisis.

When the first impeachment vote failed on December 7—only 195 lawmakers voted, five short of the 200 required, because members of the ruling party walked out of the chamber— the crowd outside the National Assembly did not diminish. Instead, it grew larger. The Democratic Party of Korea announced that it would introduce and put the impeachment motion to a vote every week until it was passed, and pressure from outside the National Assembly began to interact once again with the procedures within it. Civil society organizations that had activated emergency networks on the night of December 3 now shifted from crisis response into a sustained campaign mode through the formation of BISANG Action. BISANG Action was not a loose coalition but a formal alliance with its own decision-making and operational structures. It coordinated large weekday and weekend demonstrations involving hundreds of thousands of participants in Seoul and regional cities.

The demand that had crystallized on the night of December 3—that President Yoon Suk Yeol should be held accountable—now found institutional expression through impeachment proceedings underway in the National Assembly. Once again, the street and parliament entered into dialogue with one another.

The December 14 Impeachment Vote in the National Assembly

At approximately 9:20 P.M. on December 7, after the first impeachment motion was discarded because a quorum was not reached, representatives of the citizens' movement issued a public statement and formally ended the rally. They simultaneously announced that candlelight demonstrations would be held every evening beginning the following Monday.

The daily candlelight rallies that began the next day attracted approximately 100,000 participants each evening despite taking place on weekdays. These gatherings served as stepping stones that mobilized people toward the second impeachment vote scheduled for December 14. Public opinion had swung decisively behind

5 and 6. Major automakers and parts manufacturers, including Hyundai Motor and GM Korea, participated in the strike, with at least 70,000 workers joining on the afternoon of December 5 alone. Additionally, approximately 400 workplaces that lack the right to strike joined the action in the form of a "political strike." The Railway Workers' Union, affiliated with the Public Service and Transport Workers' Union, went on strike starting with the first train on December 5, while non-regular school workers (such as school meal preparers) launched a general strike on December 6. *Maeil Labor News*, "Backbone of the KCTU General Strike."

impeachment even before the second vote. In a Gallup Korea survey conducted December 10–12 (after the first motion had failed on December 7 and before the second vote scheduled for December 14), 75 percent of respondents supported Yoon's impeachment and only 21 percent opposed it. In the same survey, 71 percent judged that the December 3 events amounted to insurrection, and disapproval of Yoon's performance in office reached 85 percent, the highest level recorded during his entire term. This weight of opinion bore directly on wavering legislators of the ruling party in the days before the vote.[4]

This shift in opinion was matched by pressure in the streets, where organized labor pressed hardest and earliest. Having been a particular target of the administration from its first year, the labor movement grasped more immediately than most what a successful coup would have meant for it, and unions and workers escalated accordingly in the days between the two votes. After the first impeachment motion collapsed on December 7 through the ruling party's boycott, the metalworkers' union—the largest industrial federation within the KCTU—escalated from the two-hour stoppages of the first days into a full one-day strike. On December 11, metalworkers left their workplaces and rallied outside People Power Party offices in cities across the country—Gwangju, Daejeon, Ulsan, Changwon, and Cheonan among them—denouncing the party as complicit in the insurrection; the following day, expanded-cadre delegations struck and converged on Seoul in a rally ten thousand strong demanding the party's dissolution. This industrial action did not run parallel to the parliamentary process but bore directly upon it: by concentrating pressure on the ruling party whose defections would decide the outcome, labor's mobilization in the streets and the impeachment vote inside the Assembly pushed in the same direction.[5]

On December 14, approximately twice as many citizens gathered as had attended the first impeachment rally (see table 6). According to organizers, two million people participated, making it the second-largest demonstration in South Korean constitutional history.[6] Demonstrations took place not only in Yeouido but also throughout Seoul and simultaneously across the country. In preparation for the demonstrations, public transportation capacity was expanded, including additional service on Seoul Subway Lines 5 and 9, which provide access to Yeouido. During this period the practice of prepaying for food and beverages at nearby cafés and restaurants so that demonstrators could use them became widespread. Supporters paid in advance for food and drinks at shops near the rally sites and posted proof of payment

4. Gallup Korea, "Gallup Korea Daily Opinion No. 606." The survey was conducted December 10–12, 2024, among 1,002 adults nationwide by computer-assisted telephone interview, with a margin of error of ±3.1 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level.
5. *Geumsok Nodongja*, "The KMWU"; Kim Hae-jung, "KMWU to Launch a One-Day General Strike."
6. The first was the "6th Day of Protest for the Immediate Resignation of Park Geun-hye" held on December 3, 2016, during which an estimated 2.3 million people gathered according to the organizers.

on social media, along with a shared list of participating shops and a map. A citizen-created website, Siwido Bammeokgo ("Protesters Have to Eat Too"), soon began mapping these shops near rally sites across the country, indicating which items had been prepaid, the quantities available, and whether any remained in stock. For protesters, the arrangement was simple, as one newspaper headline put it: "Here for the Rally? Just Have It."[7] Prominent K-pop artists, actors, and film directors also joined the movement. As participation increased and public opinion turned increasingly against the government, a growing number of legislators within the ruling party publicly announced their support for impeachment.

The second impeachment vote ultimately succeeded by a vote of 204 to 85, and at least twelve legislators from the ruling People Power Party voted in favor despite their party's official position. During the first vote, most ruling-party legislators had followed party instructions and refused to participate. However, after citizens watched legislators leave the plenary chamber during a live broadcast and responded with intense public criticism, all ruling-party legislators were compelled to attend the second vote. The 204 votes in favor cleared the two-thirds threshold of 200 required to impeach by a margin of just four.

The strengthening of the impeachment charges before the second vote also proved effective. The revised strategy focused specifically on the unconstitutional and illegal nature of the December 3 martial law declaration. By emphasizing the grave accusation of "insurrection," advocates reduced the psychological burden on ruling-party legislators and increased support for impeachment.

Formation and Maintenance of a Broad Coalition

The resistance movement that unfolded over approximately four months—from the declaration of martial law on December 3, 2024, until the Constitutional Court's decision to uphold impeachment and remove President Yoon from office on April 4, 2025—was a highly sophisticated process of collective decision-making in which previously fragmented sectors of the movement strategically united and managed their differences around the single objective of impeachment. This process was made possible through the integration of "two tracks": the establishment of governance structures that fostered inclusion and democratic participation, and the principle of "minimum program, maximum alliance."

Reaching Consensus on Impeachment as the Single Objective

Prior to the declaration of martial law, civil society was divided into two broad currents regarding how forcefully to confront the

7. Lee Bo-hee, "'Here for the Rally? Just Have It'"; Lee Bo-hee, "'Have Your Coffee and Gimbap Here.'"

Yoon Suk Yeol administration.

In 2023 and much of 2024, the majority of civil society adhered to a "holding the government to account" (*simpan*) stance. Given that Yoon Suk Yeol was democratically elected, the prevailing view was that—unless a serious crisis undermining the constitutional order were to arise—it would be more appropriate to hold him accountable for his governance and policies, and to evaluate and check them, rather than rejecting his term in office outright. This is why the Emergency Action coalition, which included a broad range of civil society organizations such as the PSPD, used the more cautious term "holding the government to account" (*simpan*) rather than "resignation."[8]

The KCTU had previously adhered to this stance as well, but following the incident on May 1, 2023—in which Yang Hoe-dong,[9] an executive of the Construction Workers' Union, died by self-immolation in protest against the government's crackdown on the union—the KCTU escalated the intensity of its struggle against the government from "accountability" to "resignation." Subsequently, the National Action led by the KCTU came to represent a direct "resignation" stance,[10] demanding that the president step down immediately, regardless of the legitimacy of his term.

The December 3 martial law declaration became a political turning point that immediately rendered these strategic differences irrelevant. Impeachment emerged as the most realistic and lawful path for achieving the political objective of removing Yoon from office.[11] Witnessing the National Assembly exercise its Article 77(5) authority to lift martial law, civil society concluded that the synergy between institutional resistance (a parliamentary vote) and street resistance required making passage of an impeachment motion the highest short-term priority.[12]

Internal Decision-Making Structures and Governance

BISANG Action established a multilayered governance structure designed to prevent any group from being shut out of decisions and to hold the coalition together. It comprised the following bodies (see also table 5):

> Steering Committee (open to all member organizations, with close to a hundred taking part each week): Met weekly to

8. Lee Ji-hyun, interview.
9. Yang Hoe-dong, the head of the 3rd District of the Gangwon Construction Branch of the KCTU Construction Workers' Union, set himself on fire on May 1, 2023, ahead of a substantive review of his arrest warrant—which was issued amid a massive investigation launched by the Yoon administration after it labeled the union's activities as "gangsters"—and died the following day. In the wake of his death, the KCTU shifted the focus of its anti-government struggle from "judging the administration" to "ousting the administration."
10. Eom Mi-kyung, interview.
11. Eom Mi-kyung, interview.
12. Lee Ji-hyun, interview; Jeon Jin-han, interview.

Table 5. Decision-making bodies of BISANG Action

Body	Composition	Role
Steering Committee	Open to all member organizations; close to a hundred took part each week	Met weekly to determine routine campaign plans and overall protest strategy
Leadership Council	Seventeen members, allocated in a manner similar to parliamentary composition, including representatives of LGBTQ+, climate justice, and women's organizations	Held prior discussions and made political judgments on major developments
National Representatives' Assembly	Representatives of member organizations nationwide	Convened when broader consultation and consensus-building across the coalition were required

Sources: Lee Ji-hyun, interview; Lee Ho-rim, interview.

determine routine campaign plans and overall protest strategy.[13]

Leadership Council (seventeen members): Conducted prior discussions and made political judgments regarding major developments. Efforts were made to secure democratic legitimacy by allocating representation in a manner similar to parliamentary composition, ensuring participation not only from large organizations but also from representatives of LGBTQ+ movements, climate justice groups, women's organizations, and other constituencies.[14]

National Representatives' Assembly: Convened when broader consultation and consensus-building across the coalition were required.[15]

When discussions failed to produce agreement, decisions were ultimately resolved through voting after a designated period of deliberation. However, minority opinions and the reasoning behind them were recorded in detail in meeting minutes, minimizing mistrust and internal division.[16]

13. Lee Ji-hyun, interview.
14. Lee Ji-hyun, interview; Lee Ho-rim, interview.
15. Lee Ji-hyun, interview.
16. Lee Ji-hyun, interview.

Conflict and Coordination Around Short-Term and Long-Term Goals

As the movement continued over an extended period, intense internal debates emerged regarding questions of what goals the movement should pursue. Considerations included:

> Short-term goals: Short-term goals enjoyed widespread support, including passage of the impeachment motion and punishment of those responsible for insurrection. Until the impeachment motion passed on December 14, applying pressure to members of the National Assembly and maintaining a continuous presence in public squares constituted the overwhelming consensus.[17] Afterward, campaign actions aimed at securing Yoon's arrest and detention—including the Namtaeryeong and Hannam-dong mobilizations[18]—became additional short-term objectives.[19]
>
> Long-term goals: The most significant tension among the coalition's 1,700 participating organizations concerned the question of what kind of society should emerge after impeachment—with a dividing line between "immediate resignation" and "social reform."[20] A pragmatic position favored concentrating solely on immediate removal from office, while others argued that the moment should be used to advance more than 108 social reform demands under the banner of "social transformation."[21]
>
> Debates over political neutrality: As a presidential election increasingly appeared on the horizon after impeachment, disagreements emerged between those who believed that forces should consolidate around a specific political leader (such as Lee Jae-myung) and those who argued for independent political organizing or maintaining the autonomy of social

17. Eom Mi-kyung, interview.
18. Namtaeryeong and Hannam-dong were two focal sites of the mobilization that followed Yoon Suk Yeol's suspension from office on December 14, 2024. Hannam-dong, a district in central Seoul, is where Yoon had relocated the presidential residence and confined himself after his impeachment; it became the epicenter of the contest over the warrant to detain him, with a failed first attempt to execute it on January 3, 2025, and a successful second one on January 15. Namtaeryeong, a pass on Seoul's southern boundary, was where a farmers' tractor convoy marching toward the residence on December 21, 2024, was halted by a police barricade, prompting thousands of citizens to converge overnight and hold the line alongside them until police withdrew the next day. Both sites became shorthand for the broad, cross-sector citizen mobilization of these weeks, which is why they recur in the pages that follow.
19. Lee Ji-hyun, interview; Eom Mi-kyung, interview; Lee Ho-rim, interview.
20. Lee Ji-hyun, interview.
21. Lee Ji-hyun, interview; Eom Mi-kyung, interview; Lee Ho-rim, interview.

movements. These tensions generated considerable internal turbulence.[22]

Core Principles of Conflict Management

The strategic principle that enabled organizations with diverse political orientations to remain united for four months was "minimum program, maximum alliance."[23] Recognizing the exceptional nature of the crisis, participants shared the understanding that "even when differences exist, if they are not fundamental enough to prevent us from moving forward together, we should seek agreement."[24]

At the same time, some members of BISANG Action took their own actions independently of the coalition. For example, on December 12—two days before the second impeachment vote, while most attention was fixed on the National Assembly in Yeouido—the KCTU acted on its own initiative to march on Hannam-dong, the neighborhood of Yoon's official residence, for the first time. The choice of date was pointed: December 12 was the forty-fifth anniversary of Chun Doo-hwan's 1979 military mutiny, and the KCTU's president framed the action as a refusal to let that "night of disgrace" repeat itself. What began as a small, deliberately planned tactical initiative drew citizens as it went: by early evening some ten thousand had gathered at the residence gates, occupying the roadway and chanting for Yoon's arrest before dispersing to join the rally at the National Assembly. The purpose, as one KCTU leader later put it, was to make visible that Yoon himself was there, and to break out of a protest repertoire that had rarely moved beyond the symbolic ground of Gwanghwamun. The episode prefigured the larger overnight occupations at Hannam-dong and Namtaeryeong that would follow in the weeks after.[25]

As mobilization emerged from the ground up, the coalition also adopted a flexible approach. In cases such as the occupations and vigils at Hannam-dong and Namtaeryeong, even when actions had not been planned in advance by movement leadership, organized groups joined and supported them once citizens had already established a front line of resistance.[26]

The same flexibility guided the movement's approach toward responding to far-right counter-mobilization: rather than direct confrontation, participants sought to isolate the far right through sheer numbers, a principle examined below.[27]

22. Eom Mi-kyung, interview.
23. Lee Ho-rim, interview.
24. Lee Ho-rim, interview.
25. *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, "Impeachment Rally Marches on the Presidential Residence." The tactical character and dynamics of the action—initiated by the KCTU on a small scale before citizens joined—are drawn from Eom Mi-kyung, interview.
26. Eom Mi-kyung, interview; Lee Ho-rim, interview; Jeon Jin-han, interview.
27. Lee Ho-rim, interview.

Citizen Donations and Material Solidarity

The shared costs of BISANG Action's activities—from its mass rallies to a wide range of other actions and events—rested less on dues from member organizations than on the participatory support of ordinary citizens. Popular civic support provided both a means of covering expenses and a structure through which citizens continually affirmed the legitimacy of the resistance. Lee Ji-hyun recalled that "whenever we were struggling financially, money came in," and that although coalition organizations contributed dues and resources, "citizens provided far more money than that."[28] Lee was speaking of this shared budget, not of each member organization's finances; as the next section shows, member organizations also carried costs of their own by redirecting their regular budgets and staff to the campaign. Because information about urgent needs circulated rapidly through channels civil society had already built, including social media and YouTube, citizens often transferred funds immediately, without the need for organized fundraising campaigns.

This support extended well beyond money. During the overnight occupations of Namtaeryeong and Hannam-dong amid the severe winter, citizens funded heating buses, food trucks, and hand warmers, and supporters who could not attend in person prepaid nearby restaurants and cafés so that participants could use them free of charge. Other contributions resisted easy quantification: anonymous citizens organized themselves into shifts to clean restrooms in nearby public facilities—volunteer labor that effectively replaced paid services and helped sustain the occupation over time.

The "All-In" Strategy of Civil Society Organizations

Established organizations, for their part, redirected their routine budgets and personnel toward the campaign, with many temporarily suspending or minimizing their regular activities to concentrate their full capacity on impeachment and ending the insurrection. PSPD alone assigned more than ten full-time activists to the BISANG Action situation room, absorbing the personnel costs internally while providing the professional infrastructure that movement operations required. The resources accumulated during the campaign outlasted it: after impeachment was upheld, remaining funds were transferred to a Documentation and Commemoration Committee, which used them to collect approximately 53,000 citizen records, publish a white paper, and support other follow-up initiatives.[29]

28. Lee Ji-hyun, interview.
29. White Paper Committee, *Record of the Plaza of Light*.

Sustaining Candlelight Mobilization During the Constitutional Court Proceedings

A key quantitative foundation that sustained mobilization throughout the four-month period was the presence of organized labor cadres, particularly those of the KCTU. Eom Mi-kyung pointed out that, contrary to a common impression, the KCTU did not stay on strike for four months: each of its later strike resolutions was conditional, and none had to be carried out. What sustained the impression of a strike was presence. Even on weekdays, when participation could have declined, a core of some 500 to 600 union officials from the Seoul metropolitan area filled the square almost every day.[30] The commitment of these organized actors offset the sense of isolation that ordinary citizens might otherwise have felt in the public square and helped establish a psychological line of resistance by signaling that large-scale mobilization could resume at any moment. "Because labor kept filling the square," Eom explained, "it had the effect of a strike's momentum"—the visual effect of a strike that was still going on—highlighting how organized constituencies provided the movement's physical foundation.[31]

The square also functioned not merely as a site of protest but as a liberated space and a community that replenished participants' emotional energy. Along with traditional elements like candles and protest songs, the square filled with K-pop music and symbols. Participants waved the glow sticks typically used at concerts and turned popular songs into protest chants, transforming long winter nights of waiting into something closer to a festival. The most visible break from the 2016–2017 candlelight protests was precisely this—the concert light stick in place of the candle. The shift was generational and gendered as much as aesthetic: young women in their twenties and thirties in particular became a conspicuous presence. This festive quality was not a secondary aid to endurance but one of the things that made endurance possible: by lowering the barrier to participation and drawing people in through familiar pleasures, it sustained the movement through months of uncertainty, where earlier Korean protest had been governed by solemn seriousness. The lightness also carried meaning—as one sociologist observed, where one side sent in soldiers, the other answered with light sticks: not mere spectacle but an assertion of unmistakably nonviolent, democratic protest.[32]

Jeon Jin-han of the Korean Federation of Medical Groups for Health Rights described the overnight gatherings at Namtaeryeong and Hannam-dong as "spaces similar to the liberated zones of Gwangju, where people shared rice balls, donated hand warmers,

30. Eom Mi-kyung, interview.
31. Eom Mi-kyung, interview.
32. Han Ji-eun et al., "Waving K-pop Light Sticks." The sociologists quoted are Joo Eun-woo of Chung-Ang University and Choi Hang-seop of Kookmin University.

and cared for one another."[33] Citizens endured freezing winter conditions with the determination that "we cannot go home until Yoon Suk Yeol is removed from office," while supporting one another. This shared experience of solidarity became a powerful psychological safeguard against activist burnout.[34] Lee Ji-hyun recalled that this "power of solidarity" constituted the practical force that enabled the square to endure despite uncertainty about the outcome.[35]

Comparison with the 2016–17 candlelight movement that led to the impeachment of Park Geun-hye highlights how the agency and confidence of civil society had grown considerably. Eom noted that during the 2016 movement, KCTU members often felt compelled to remove their union vests and present themselves as ordinary citizens because organized labor had been heavily stigmatized. This time, the KCTU stood at the front from the start, with its officers deployed to lead the coalition, and Eom came away convinced that citizens wanted a KCTU that would "fight at the people's command." "We had it wrong," she said. "Citizens never asked us to take off our vests, and they never asked us to lower our flags." The old reflex had not disappeared entirely: when Eom hosted the December 7 rally, others in the organizers' situation room asked her to take off her vest. She refused, and no one in the crowd, she recalled, raised any objection.[36]

Lee Ji-hyun further emphasized that heightened public sensitivity to safety issues—shaped in part by the experience of the Itaewon disaster of 2022, when 159 people were killed and nearly 200 injured by a crowd crush at a Halloween festival—played an important role in defining the culture of the square. She observed that "the coordination between citizens and movement organizations worked better than it had during the Park Geun-hye impeachment."[37] Building on lessons learned from previous mobilizations, the 2024–25 movement implemented more sophisticated principles of equality and more interactive forms of communication. This development helped expand the movement beyond the removal of a single political leader toward the broader horizon of social transformation.[38]

Pro-Government Counter-Mobilization

The "National Rally to Protect President Yoon Suk Yeol" began in October 2024. Although at that time calls for Yoon's impeachment were not a widely shared goal of the opposition, the demand was beginning to gain momentum. From late 2024, pro-government rallies were held every Saturday in Gwanghwamun Square.

Before the December 3 insurrection attempt, these demonstrations had largely

33. Jeon Jin-han, interview.
34. Jeon Jin-han, interview.
35. Lee Ji-hyun, interview.
36. Eom Mi-kyung, interview.
37. Lee Ji-hyun, interview.
38. Lee Ji-hyun, interview.

Table 6. Key votes, crowd estimates, and public opinion, December 2024–March 2025

Date	Event	Figures
December 7, 2024	First impeachment vote	Only 195 of 300 legislators vote after ruling-party members walk out; the motion lapses, five short of the 200 required
December 9–13	Weekday candlelight rallies	About 100,000 participants each evening
December 10–12	Gallup Korea survey	75% support impeachment, 21% oppose; 71% consider the December 3 events an insurrection; 85% disapprove of Yoon's performance
December 11–12	Metalworkers' strike and rallies	Rallies at People Power Party offices nationwide; rally of ten thousand in Seoul on December 12
December 12	KCTU march on Hannam-dong	Some ten thousand at the residence gates
December 14	Second impeachment vote	Passes 204 to 85, with at least twelve PPP legislators in favor; about 2 million participants (organizers); about 41,000 at the pro-Yoon rally in Gwanghwamun (police)
March 1, 2025	Pro-Yoon rallies	About 120,000 (65,000 in Gwanghwamun and 55,000 in Yeouido; unofficial police estimates)

Note: Anti-Yoon figures are organizer estimates; pro-Yoon figures are police estimates.

Sources: Gallup Korea, "Gallup Korea Daily Opinion No. 606"; Jeong Yoon-joo and Lee Young-seop, "200,000 Gather in Yeouido"; Park Dong-hwan et al., "120,000 vs. 18,000"; chapter 6.

consisted of routine pro-government gatherings defending President Yoon. However, the shock of martial law and lingering trauma from the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye contributed to large-scale mobilization of the conservative base. On December 14, 2024, the day the impeachment motion passed in the National Assembly, police estimated that approximately 41,000 people gathered at Gwanghwamun.[39] On March 1, 2025, unofficial police estimates suggested participation reached approximately 120,000 people, including 65,000 in Gwanghwamun and 55,000 in Yeouido.[40]

39. Jeong Yoon-joo and Lee Young-seop, "200,000 Gather in Yeouido."
40. Park Dong-hwan et al., "120,000 vs. 18,000."

The movement drew heavily from the Christian right, particularly conservative Protestant communities, while also attracting a notable number of younger participants who became highly active in online spaces. Incidents such as the occupation and riot at the Seoul Western District Court, the occupation of the National Human Rights Commission, and the alleged February 13 plot to storm the Constitutional Court all reflected the increasingly militant character of this mobilization.[41]

Regarding the size and character of the pro-Yoon demonstrations, Lee Ji-hyun noted that during February and March 2025—after the impeachment motion had passed and some of the urgency among anti-Yoon protesters had diminished—"there were moments when their side had greater momentum and larger numbers than ours."[42] She emphasized that this mobilization was not merely the product of orchestrated participation but consisted of people who "came out with genuine determination and conviction," suggesting that prolonged political uncertainty generated authentic collective action among conservatives.[43] Lee Ho-rim further argued that these far-right forces had not emerged suddenly. Rather, they were largely the same actors who had spent the previous decade opposing Pride festivals and anti-discrimination legislation, now reorganized around the political agenda of resisting impeachment.[44]

Physical tensions between the two camps were carefully managed through principles of nonviolent separation and civic restraint. Lee Ji-hyun explained that the strategy of avoiding direct confrontation was the result of extensive internal discussion within the resistance movement.[45] For example, even in highly volatile situations in which participants from opposing camps encountered one another while chanting slogans on subway escalators following rallies in Hannam-dong, organizers sought to prevent direct clashes. Human rights monitoring teams composed of lawyers from Lawyers for a Democratic Society were positioned behind protest lines to

41. On January 19, 2025, after a court issued an arrest warrant for President Yoon, hundreds of his supporters stormed the Seoul Western District Court, smashing windows and furniture, assaulting police officers and reporters, and rushing toward the office of the judge who had issued the warrant. About ninety people were arrested at the scene, and many were subsequently indicted. On February 10, while the National Human Rights Commission was deliberating on a motion urging the guarantee of Yoon Suk Yeol's "right to defense," pro-Yoon supporters occupied several floors of the Commission's building and, without any legal authority, checked the identities and affiliations of building visitors and journalists while controlling access. In February, after citizens reported related posts to the police, authorities investigated evidence that pro-Yoon users had threatened to storm the Constitutional Court online—some shared photos and floor plans from preliminary site visits, while others threatened to set the building on fire. The police requested arrest warrants for users who posted such threats and assigned individual security teams to the Constitutional Court justices; no actual attack took place.
42. Lee Ji-hyun, interview.
43. Lee Ji-hyun, interview.
44. Lee Ho-rim, interview.
45. Lee Ji-hyun, interview.

help de-escalate potential conflicts.[46] This approach represented a deliberate tactical choice designed to preserve the moral legitimacy of the resistance movement and prevent violent incidents that could provide martial law supporters with a justification for renewed repression. Such strategic restraint was not simply a matter of avoiding conflict. It reflected a social movement conviction that "the answer is to isolate the far right through the overwhelming power of citizens."[47]

Counter-mobilization also prompted the resistance movement to refine and broaden its message. Initially, many activists tended to dismiss impeachment opponents. However, following such incidents of court-attacking violence, movement organizations began to take more explicit positions, stating that such actions were unacceptable and should be punished.[48]

LGBTQ+ activists in particular highlighted the extent to which far-right mobilization was intertwined with anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-feminist ideologies. To educate the broader public, they produced and distributed a publication titled *Far-Right Report*.[49] Lee Ho-rim reflected that it was important to communicate that "the oppression experienced by LGBTQ+ people is not separate from the condition of democracy in our society; it is part of the same broader movement."[50]

The Constitutional Court Decision of April 4

The movement's readiness was put to the test right up until the last moment. On April 3, one day before the Constitutional Court's ruling, the KCTU held an emergency delegates' assembly near Gwanghwamun. Following official decision-making procedures, the delegates approved a plan to expand the struggle if the Constitutional Court failed to remove President Yoon Suk Yeol from office. The KCTU adopted the position and publicly signaled that in such an event, it would immediately take to the streets and launch a full-scale general strike involving all its affiliated unions starting on April 7.[51]

On April 4, 2025, the Constitutional Court unanimously upheld the impeachment, with all eight justices finding all five grounds for impeachment—including the declaration of martial law—to be unconstitutional and unlawful. The Court concluded that the president had violated his constitutional duty to safeguard the Constitution and that the public interest served by his removal

46. Lee Ji-hyun, interview.
47. Lee Ji-hyun, interview.
48. Lee Ji-hyun, interview.
49. White Paper Committee, *Record of the Plaza of Light*; Lee Ho-rim, interview.
50. Lee Ho-rim, interview.
51. The resolution was passed unanimously at an extraordinary delegate assembly with a quorum of 1,177 of the KCTU's 1,782 delegates present. Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, "KCTU Delegate Assembly Resolves."

outweighed the national costs associated with impeachment.

As a result, former President Yoon immediately lost his office and became the second president in South Korean constitutional history to be removed from office through impeachment.

Since the Constitutional Court upheld the impeachment and removed President Yoon from office on April 4, the KCTU plan was never actually carried out. However, the fact that this plan was adopted through an official resolution—rather than merely being a temporary call to action—clearly demonstrates how thoroughly the organized labor movement had prepared a concrete path for escalating the struggle in advance, ready to be activated immediately should the ruling go the other way.

CHAPTER 7

AFTER IMPEACHMENT: ELECTIONS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

(2025)

Institutional Outcomes: Presidential Impeachment and Criminal Accountability

Four days after the Constitutional Court unanimously upheld the impeachment of Yoon Suk Yeol on April 4, the government officially set June 3 as the date of the twenty-first presidential election. In that election, Lee Jae-myung was elected president with 49.42 percent of the vote. The margin between Lee and the runner-up, People Power Party candidate Kim Moon-soo (41.15 percent), was 8.27 percentage points.

As the candidate of the Democratic Party, which had played a leading role in lifting martial law, Lee's victory reflected the strong operation of public demands to hold former President Yoon and the former ruling camp, including the People Power Party, accountable. Citizens elected a new president with expectations that the forces responsible for the insurrection would be punished and that democracy would be restored.[1] At the same time, the fact that candidate Kim Moon-soo received more than 40 percent of the vote despite never clearly stating his position on the impeachment of former President Yoon signals a potential source of future political conflict.[2]

Yoon Suk Yeol is currently facing seven criminal trials, four of which are directly related to the martial law and insurrection crisis. South Korea has previously prosecuted former presidents for the crime of insurrection. However, this is the first time that a sitting president has been investigated on charges of insurrection. Unlike former President Chun Doo-hwan, who received a death sentence at first instance, Yoon was sentenced to life imprisonment in the first-instance insurrection trial. This trial and sentence were possible because the attempted self-coup failed as a result of the success of citizen resistance, preventing the large-scale harms that might otherwise have occurred.[3]

Incomplete Consolidation: Failed Constitutional Reform and Institutional Limits

Following the June 3 presidential election, a new government took office on an explicit pledge to restore democracy. Early assessments, however, suggested that democratic restoration remained incomplete and contested. Marking the administration's first 100 days in September 2025, the Citizens' Coalition for Economic Justice (CCEJ) offered a cautious evaluation, criticizing the government's record on appointments and pardons as falling short of standards of accountability.[4] Six months later, in March 2026, a survey of 539 university professors conducted by *Professor Newspaper* (Kyosu Shinmun) found broad overall support for

1. Lee Sang-heon, "From Child Laborer to President."
2. Park Song-yi, "Political Landscape and Public Opinion Have Shifted."
3. Jeong Hwan-bong and Lee Na-young, "Failed Insurrection Considered a Mitigating Factor."
4. Citizens' Coalition for Economic Justice, "Assessment of the First 100 Days."

the administration's first year in office, with 82.6 percent of respondents offering a positive assessment.[5] At the same time, the survey revealed substantial variation across policy areas. Respondents identified prosecutorial and judicial reform as the government's greatest achievement (24.4 percent), yet the same area also ranked second among the most disappointing reforms (13.3 percent).[6] Education reform was identified as by far the weakest area, cited by 43.2 percent of respondents.[7] High overall approval, therefore, did not necessarily indicate consistent progress across sectors, and the implementation of the government's promise of democratic restoration remained uneven.

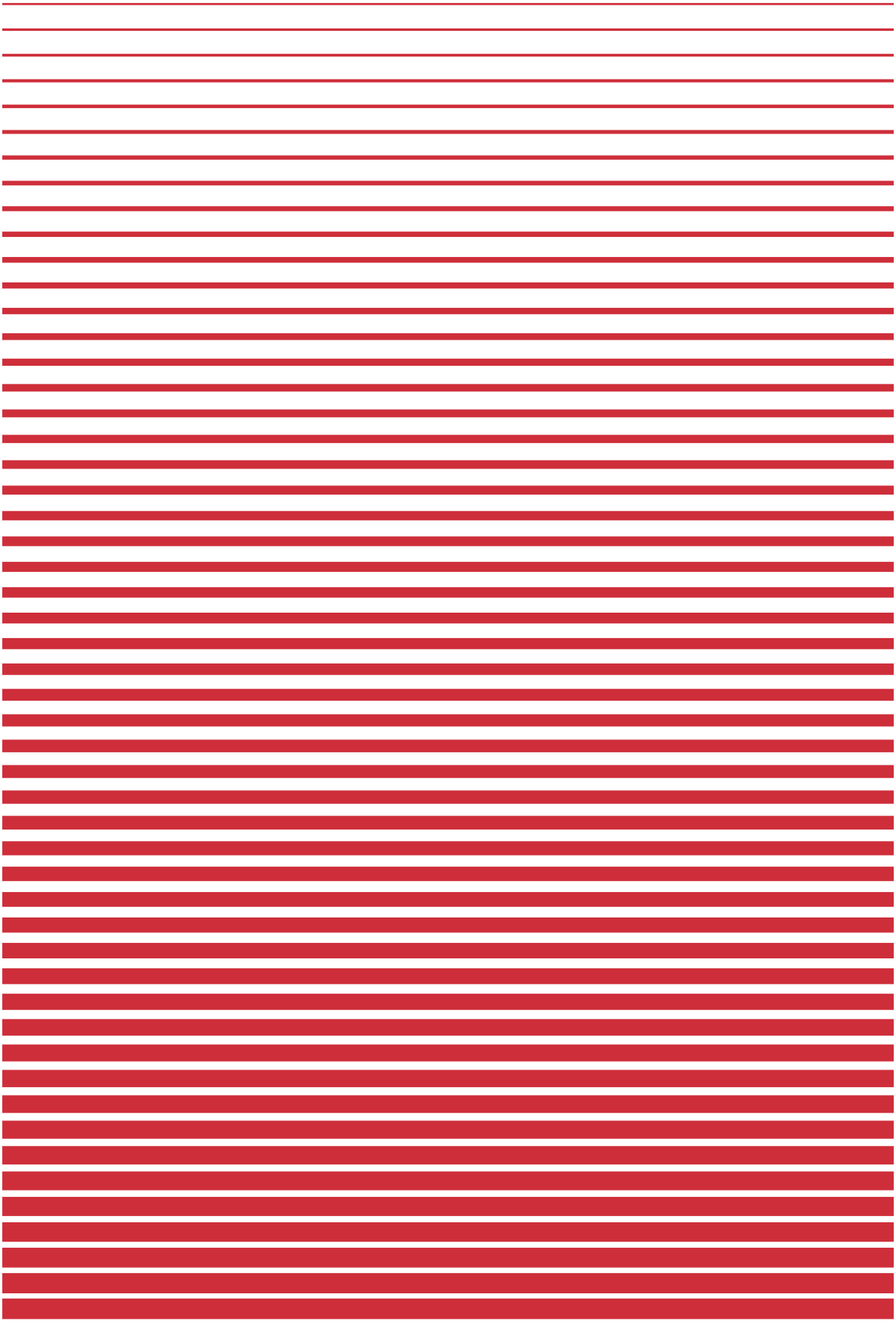
The most important indicator of the limits of democratic consolidation emerged in May 2026. An effort to amend the Constitution to strengthen parliamentary oversight of future martial law declarations ultimately failed. The governing party had already scaled back much of the proposal's original ambition and proved unwilling to expend the political capital needed to secure passage, while the opposition People Power Party sought to block it through an unprecedented threat of filibuster. The amendment collapsed.

National Assembly Speaker Woo Won-shik warned:

> If another illegal coup of this kind occurs twenty or thirty years from now, the National Assembly will become a criminal in the eyes of history.[8]

The failure to establish constitutional safeguards capable of preventing future self-coups demonstrates an important limitation. Although citizens successfully neutralized martial law, citizen resistance alone has not guaranteed the institutional reforms necessary to prevent its recurrence.

5. Gu Mu-seo, "One Year into the Lee Jae-myung Administration."
6. Gu Mu-seo, "One Year into the Lee Jae-myung Administration."
7. Gu Mu-seo, "One Year into the Lee Jae-myung Administration."
8. Seo Hye-rim et al., "Attempt at South Korea's First Constitutional Amendment."



CONCLUSION: LESSONS FOR DEFENDERS OF DEMOCRACY

There are lessons from the South Korean case that may be relevant to defenders of democracy in other times and places. The dual-layer analytical framework of anti-militarist infrastructure developed in this report is intended not only as a tool for explaining a single case, but also as a broader contribution to the study of civil resistance against democratic breakdown from within. The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to identify lessons supported by the evidence and to assess the extent to which they may be transferable beyond the Korean context.

The Speed of Resistance Depends on Infrastructure Built in Ordinary Times

The most generalizable proposition emerging from this report is straightforward: the speed of resistance to authoritarian rupture depends not on spontaneous courage in the moment, but on infrastructure accumulated in ordinary times. As Chapter 3 demonstrated through both quantitative and qualitative evidence, South Korean citizens began to act before receiving instructions from any organization, invoked constitutional provisions almost immediately after livestreams began, and understood that their physical presence at the gates of the National Assembly constituted a form of constitutionally meaningful action. None of these capacities were invented on the night of December 3. They had already been cultivated and were ready to be activated.

As defined in the introduction, this infrastructure consists of both internal and external dimensions. The central lesson of the Korean case is that these dimensions are not alternatives but complements. Internal infrastructure without external infrastructure may produce individually courageous but organizationally fragmented responses. External infrastructure without internal infrastructure may generate well-trained organizations whose base, members, or supporters nevertheless hesitate when confronted with unprecedented constitutional rupture. The broader lesson is therefore not a particular mobilization technique, but the proposition that democratic resilience depends upon the simultaneous cultivation of both. In South Korea, the most important civic education took place less in classrooms than in public squares. Decades of candlelight protests had made taking to the streets in times of political crisis a familiar, almost instinctive response, while memories of Gwangju and 1987 reminded people of what was at stake. Constitutional knowledge was also part of this preparedness. The provision allowing the National Assembly to lift martial law had been explained to the public months before it became necessary in practice.

Activists in other countries might ask themselves similar questions about their own societies. Do citizens know which institutions have the legal authority to revoke a state of emergency and where they would need to go to protect those institutions? Have they practiced gathering quickly and peacefully often enough for it to become habitual rather than something

they must improvise in a crisis? This kind of preparedness, and organizational networks that are sufficiently dense, trusted, and practiced to function under conditions of extreme time pressure, must be developed together.

The limits of this proposition must also be clearly specified. As noted in the introduction, this report is concerned not with democratic resistance in general but with anti-militarist infrastructure in particular. Of course, some of the capabilities highlighted in this report apply regardless of the type of threat. Rapid and organized mass mobilization is crucial not only when confronting a self-coup but also when challenging a stolen election. However, speed is not the only factor these two scenarios have in common. An analysis examining resistance against stolen elections in the Philippines, Serbia, Ukraine, and the Gambia identifies "a breakdown in loyalty among the regime's allies—including the non-cooperation, defection, and desertion of bureaucrats and security forces" as one of the common factors contributing to success in these cases.[1] In Ukraine, the military refused to participate in the crackdown and warned loyalist Interior Ministry troops that it would defend the protesters; in the Philippines, security forces who had been ordered to shoot refused to fire on crowds of citizens and joined the rebellion.

It is precisely at this point—the capacity to ensure failure when the military is mobilized as a political tool—that the concept of "anti-militarist infrastructure" gains broader explanatory power beyond the phenomenon of self-coups. What matters is how a society has historically engaged with military power: the extent to which constitutional rule and the military's political neutrality have been internalized, the degree to which soldiers are understood as fellow citizens rather than enemies, and the presence of public narratives that legitimize disobedience to unlawful orders. The Korean case contributes to civil resistance scholarship by showing how democratic overthrow through martial law and abuse of security institutions can be prevented when general resistance capacities are combined with a specifically anti-militarist orientation. In this respect, the framework complements existing scholarship on gradual democratic backsliding.

What Can Be Replicated, and What Cannot?

The resistance of December 3 depended on conditions that cannot automatically be reproduced elsewhere. For practitioners seeking lessons through comparison, it is essential to distinguish among these conditions. Some can be deliberately cultivated. Others are products of constitutional design. Still others belong to the realm of contingency (table 7). Failure to distinguish among them risks drawing the wrong lessons from the Korean experience.

The most important conditions are those that can be cultivated. The first is the

1. Zunes, "Resisting Stolen Elections."

non-cohesion of the security forces. As Chapter 4 demonstrated, the fact that soldiers did not open fire was not accidental but itself a product of resistance. Citizens addressed them not as enemies but as fellow citizens. Livestreaming cameras made the consequences of violence immediately visible. Lawyers and civilians on the scene warned personnel of their individual legal responsibility for carrying out unlawful orders. Within the military, memories of past abuses made some officers wary of unlawful orders, even though habits of unconditional obedience still prevailed at the top. In short, the norm that the military must stay out of politics was widely held by citizens but only unevenly by the military itself; on December 3, citizens enforced it from outside, at the gates of the Assembly. A norm enforced from outside, however, works only if citizens arrive in time, which is why its failure to take institutional form (see Chapter 7) matters. Together, these factors increased the psychological and legal costs of aggressive action. None of these conditions can be assumed to exist in every self-coup scenario, but all can be cultivated through deliberate effort during ordinary times. They therefore represent some of the most transferable lessons of the Korean case.

A second cultivable condition was the symbiotic relationship between street resistance and institutional action. Citizens intuitively understood that their role was to defend the physical space necessary for the National Assembly to carry out its constitutional nullification function. This understanding was possible because constitutional literacy had already become widely diffused throughout society. The resulting division of labor was not discovered spontaneously during the crisis; it had been learned beforehand.

A third enabling condition was the interaction between formal and informal structures. Formal organizations—including standing coalitions, the federations and regional branches of the KCTU, and civil society groups with emergency procedures already in place—issued calls to action within minutes on the night of December 3 and sustained broad-based solidarity for four months through BISANG Action (see Chapters 3 and 6). Yet much of what happened depended on bonds that no organization could control: couples and families encouraging one another to find the courage to participate; strangers linking arms in solidarity at the main gate; and anonymous citizens who prepaid for protesters' meals or organized shifts to clean public toilets during the winter-long occupation protests. Neither structure alone would have been sufficient. Movements that rely exclusively on formal organizations, or dismiss informal networks as too fragile to matter, overlook resources whose effectiveness has been repeatedly demonstrated in South Korea. The practical challenge is to nurture both and strengthen the connections between them.

Other conditions were structurally important but not universally available. One concerned the public visibility of the self-coup. In some respects, this visibility was not unusual. Unlike classic military coups,

which depend on surprise and secrecy to overthrow an existing government, self-coups often require public acts—martial law declarations, emergency broadcasts, and official statements—to establish a claim of legitimacy. South Korea's own history illustrates this distinction. Earlier military coups were typically carried out through the covert seizure of key facilities before public announcements were made. The December 3 self-coup followed a different script: martial law was declared publicly, security forces were deployed against political opponents, and constitutional transformation was intended to follow.

A story frequently told by activists captures this contrast. One veteran activist recalled being awakened by a younger colleague who urgently announced that a coup was underway. "What?" the veteran reportedly replied. "It's being broadcast live on television? Then it's not a coup." The remark was mistaken, but it reflected a widely held assumption about what coups are supposed to look like.

Many observers similarly believed that a coup in the age of smartphones, high-speed internet, and social media could not be concealed in the way coups had been in the past. In South Korea, when opposition politicians warned in 2024 that preparations for martial law might be underway, some critics downplayed the concern as outdated. One legislator dismissed the warnings, arguing that troop movements could no longer be concealed because citizens would photograph advancing tanks and post the images in real time.[2] Whether this assumption is valid depends partly on a country's communications environment. Yet the historical record suggests that information control remains part of the standard repertoire of would-be coup-makers. Before seizing power in 2021, Myanmar's military shut down internet access nationwide, preventing citizens from documenting events as they unfolded. Nightly internet blackouts continued for more than seventy days afterward. Thailand's military likewise relied on information control during its 2014 coup.

What proved decisive in South Korea, therefore, was not the fact that the self-coup was visible, but the fact that Yoon failed to monopolize that visibility. Citizens' practices of documenting and livestreaming events, combined with the communication channels embedded within the external layer of anti-militarist infrastructure, made such monopolization impossible. Coup-makers may attempt to restrict information flows, but when communication networks are sufficiently dense and decentralized, and when citizens are accustomed to documenting events themselves, meaningful information control becomes difficult to sustain. The lesson for practitioners elsewhere is not that coups will necessarily be visible, but that communication infrastructures and civic documentation practices should be

2. Kim Dong-hwan, "Lee Jun-seok on the Democratic Party's 'Martial Law Allegations.'"

cultivated in ways that make concealment increasingly difficult. It is also important that some of these channels had already built substantial audiences before the crisis began. A livestream by the opposition leader, watched by approximately 170,000 people at once, provided many citizens with their first clear instruction to head to the National Assembly (see Chapters 2 and 3). Such channels, along with the audiences who trust them, cannot be built in the few hours after a coup is announced; they must already be in place.

Another important but non-universal condition was the existence of a constitutional invalidation mechanism, embodied in Article 77(5) of the Constitution, and of a legislature capable of activating it. Whether such safeguards exist, and whether a parliament can physically convene to exercise them during a crisis, depends upon constitutional design. Not all democracies possess such institutional protections.

Finally, there are contingent conditions such as the absence of external intervention. The fact that the United States was not notified in advance[3] and that martial law was lifted within six hours, leaving little opportunity for outside involvement, affected the course of events. Yet this differs fundamentally from the preceding conditions. Whereas the earlier factors are internal variables that societies can cultivate or constitutional systems can provide, this concerns the fortuitous absence of an external variable beyond domestic control. Claims that the outcome might have differed under a different U.S. administration are plausible[4] but necessarily speculative. For that reason, this condition cannot be generalized as a lesson that societies can accumulate in advance. It serves only as a reminder that even successful resistance may depend, in part, on factors beyond its control.

Defeating a Coup Is Not the Same as Consolidating Democracy

The period between the coup on December 3, 2024, and the removal of President Yoon on April 4, 2025, revealed challenges fundamentally different from those of the initial six hours. After the immediate crisis passed, the political outcome remained uncertain. The central challenge became how to sustain organizational cohesion and emotional energy through months of institutional uncertainty. As Chapter 6 demonstrated, the Korean movement addressed this challenge through two mechanisms. Organized labor maintained a visible numerical presence even on weekdays when broader participation declined, helping to prevent the loss of momentum that often affects protest

3. Woo Han-ul, "United States Was Not Notified." Although debate continued within South Korea regarding whether Washington had truly been unaware, the Special Counsel investigating the insurrection stated in December 2025 that the conspirators appeared to have exploited the period between the US presidential election and the inauguration of the incoming president in order to minimize the possibility of American intervention.
4. Go Chan-man, "Would a Trump Administration Have Responded Differently?"

Table 7. Conditions behind the outcome of December 3 and their transferability

Condition	Type	How it operated on December 3	Transferable?
Non-cohesion of the security forces	Cultivable	Citizens addressed soldiers as fellow citizens; livestreams made violence visible; lawyers warned of individual legal liability; memories of past abuses made some officers wary	Yes, through deliberate effort in ordinary times
Symbiosis of street and institutional resistance	Cultivable	Citizens held the perimeter so that the Assembly could vote, drawing on widely diffused constitutional literacy	Yes
Interaction of formal and informal structures	Cultivable	Coalitions, KCTU networks, and emergency procedures worked alongside couples, families, strangers, and anonymous donors	Yes
Public visibility of the self-coup, and Yoon's failure to monopolize it	Structural	Martial law was declared on live television; citizen livestreams and dense networks defeated information control	Partly; depends on the communications environment, though documentation practices can be cultivated
Constitutional mechanism to invalidate martial law, and a legislature able to use it	Constitutional design	Article 77(5); the Assembly voted 190 to 0 at 1:01 A.M. to demand that martial law be lifted	Only where constitutions provide such safeguards
Absence of external intervention	Contingent	The United States was not notified in advance, and the six-hour duration left little room for outside involvement	No

movements during prolonged campaigns. At the same time, protest sites functioned as communities of mutual care and shared meals, mitigating the activist burnout that frequently undermines long-term mobilization. The broader lesson is that the emotional dimension of movements is not an incidental byproduct of collective action but one of its cultural and structural foundations.

A further lesson of this period, however, is more sobering. Successful resistance does not automatically produce democratic consolidation. Neutralizing a self-coup is one achievement; institutionalizing safeguards against its return is another, and the second did not follow automatically from the first. The failure in May 2026 of the constitutional amendment effort designed to strengthen parliamentary control over future martial law declarations illustrates this distinction clearly. The democratic space secured through citizen resistance was ultimately reabsorbed into the calculations of conventional politics. The result demonstrates that even when civil resistance succeeds in defeating martial law within six hours, it cannot by itself guarantee the institutional reforms necessary to prevent its return.

The work of building democratic resilience does not end with the lifting of martial law. Indeed, the post-crisis period may prove more difficult than the crisis itself. In the absence of institutional safeguards, authoritarian actors can learn from failure and develop more sophisticated pathways around democratic constraints.

Six Hours and Beyond

The South Korean experience offers defenders of democracy in other times and places not a blueprint to be copied, but a set of lessons to be considered. The capacities that decide outcomes in decisive moments are not invented in those moments. They are built long before a crisis, through the ordinary, often unremarkable work of sustaining organizations, transmitting the memory of past struggles—from the June Democratic Uprising of 1987 to the Candlelight Movement of 2016–17—and cultivating the constitutional knowledge that leads citizens to see themselves as sovereign. This is not an abstract principle but a concrete form of preparedness. It concerns citizens who, when the moment arrives, know how to throw a coat over their pajamas, hail a taxi, and head for the National Assembly; citizens who know how to link arms with strangers and become part of a human barrier. It is also why organized civil society continues its work despite repeated disappointments with established politics. If the "six hours" marked the moment when that preparedness was tested, the "and beyond" points to a deeper truth: the work of cultivating it is never finished.

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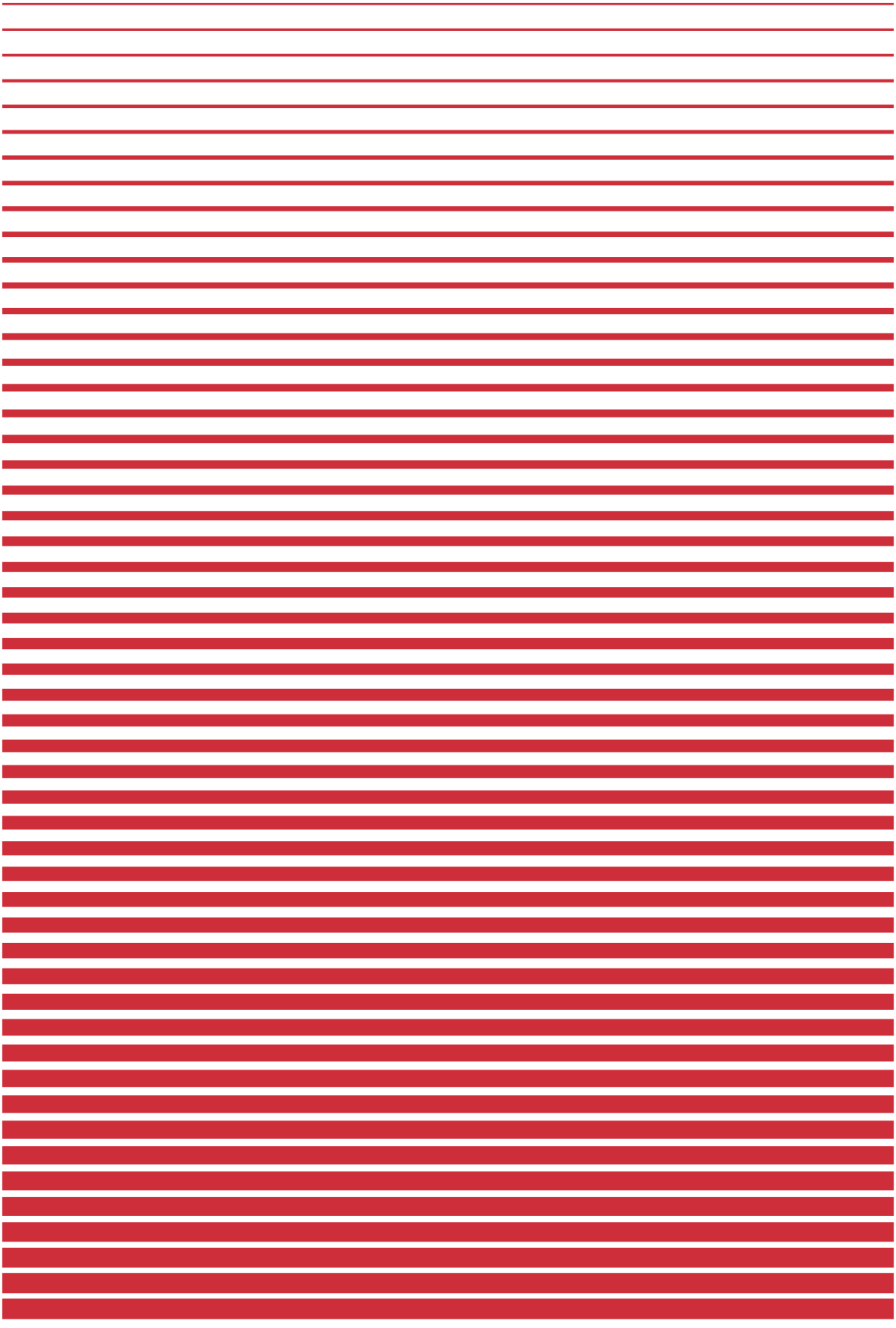
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APPENDIX

Table 8. Timeline of the 2024 South Korean Self-Coup

December 3	
Around 16:00	Kim Yong-hyun, then Minister of National Defense, holds private meeting with then Army Chief of Staff Park An-su: "Be in the Minister's office by 21:40"
17:00	Kim Yong-hyun holds private meeting with Oh Young-dae, Director of Personnel Planning at the Ministry of National Defense: "Be in the Minister's office around 21:30"
19:00	Yoon Suk Yeol and Kim Yong-hyun meet then-National Police Agency Commissioner General Cho Ji-ho and then-Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency Commissioner General Kim Bong-sik at a private residence in Samcheong-dong; hand over list of politicians to be arrested, key occupation sites, and martial law operation command documents Yoon Suk Yeol and Kim Yong-hyun subsequently return together to the Presidential Office
20:22	Yoon Suk Yeol instructs Hong Jang-won, then First Deputy Director of the National Intelligence Service, to "stand by for a call in 1–2 hours"
22:17	Cabinet meeting prior to martial law declaration (concluded in 5 minutes)
22:23	Yoon Suk Yeol delivers emergency address (reading of address takes approximately 6 minutes)
22:25	Kim Yong-hyun arrives at the Joint Chiefs of Staff Combat Control Center from the Presidential Office.
22:27	Yoon Suk Yeol declares "a state of emergency."
Around 22:27	Kim Yong-hyun instructs Yeo In-hyeong, then head of the Defense Counterintelligence Command, to arrest 14 individuals including politicians.
22:30	Approximately ten martial law troops enter the National Election Commission in Gwacheon.
22:30	Kim Yong-hyun holds video conference with commanders at corps commander level and above "Carry out mission orders in accordance with the President's will" "The Minister bears responsibility for all military activities" "Disobedience to orders will be treated as insubordination"

Around 22:30	Yeo In-hyeong requests arrest locations from Cho Ji-ho
22:35	Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency deploys five mobile units around the National Assembly
22:40	Democratic Party convenes emergency meeting of National Assembly members
22:43	Martial law forces photograph pre-election voter rolls, administrative, and security servers at the Election Commission for two minutes
22:49	Lee Jae-myung begins a YouTube livestream calling on citizens to come to the National Assembly (about 170,000 simultaneous viewers)
22:53	Yoon Suk Yeol instructs Hong Jang-won: "Unconditional support for the Defense Counterintelligence Command" Yeo In-hyeong subsequently requests arrest locations from Hong Jang-won
Around 23:00	Kim Yong-hyun delivers Proclamation No. 1 to Park An-su Subsequently takes command of martial law troops directly using a secure phone
23:04	National Assembly entrances sealed
23:04	Ministry of Welfare orders closure of seven national hospitals
23:12	Lee Jae-myung's livestream ends
23:23	Proclamation No. 1 on Emergency Martial Law promulgated at 23:23
23:31	Army Headquarters authorizes entry of martial law forces' helicopters
23:37	Police impose full control over National Assembly entrances
23:48	Martial law forces enter National Assembly grounds via helicopters, etc.
December 4	
00:27	Martial law troops attempt to force their way into the National Assembly complex
00:30–00:40	According to Kwak Jong-geun's testimony, Yoon Suk Yeol telephones him: "Break down the doors quickly, get inside, and drag out the people who are in there"

00:41	More than 150 lawmakers reach the plenary chamber
Around 01:00	KCTU emergency Central Committee resolves to launch a general strike if martial law is not lifted ("Struggle Directive No. 1")
01:01	National Assembly adopts resolution demanding the lifting of martial law (190 to 0)
Around 01:10	Speaker Woo Won-shik calls on military and police personnel to leave the Assembly grounds; troops begin to withdraw
Around 02:00	Ministry of National Defense announces that the Martial Law Command will remain in operation
Around 04:00	Emergency mobilization order at Ministry of National Defense headquarters lifted
04:22	Martial Law Command announces that deployed forces have been ordered to return to their units
04:27	Yoon Suk Yeol announces the withdrawal of troops and the lifting of martial law
04:55	All military personnel withdrawn from the Speaker's official residence in Hannam-dong

Martial Law Command Proclamation No. 1

In order to protect liberal democracy from threats posed by anti-state forces operating within the Republic of Korea and seeking to overthrow its constitutional order, and to ensure the safety of the people, the following measures are hereby proclaimed throughout the territory of the Republic of Korea effective from 23:00 on December 3, 2024.

1. All political activities are prohibited, including the activities of the National Assembly and local councils, political parties, political associations, assemblies, and demonstrations.

2. Any act that denies or attempts to overthrow the liberal democratic system is prohibited. The dissemination of fake news, manipulation of public opinion, and false propaganda are also prohibited.

3. All media and publications shall be subject to the control of the Martial Law Command.

4. Strikes, work slowdowns, assemblies, and other actions deemed to incite social disorder are prohibited.

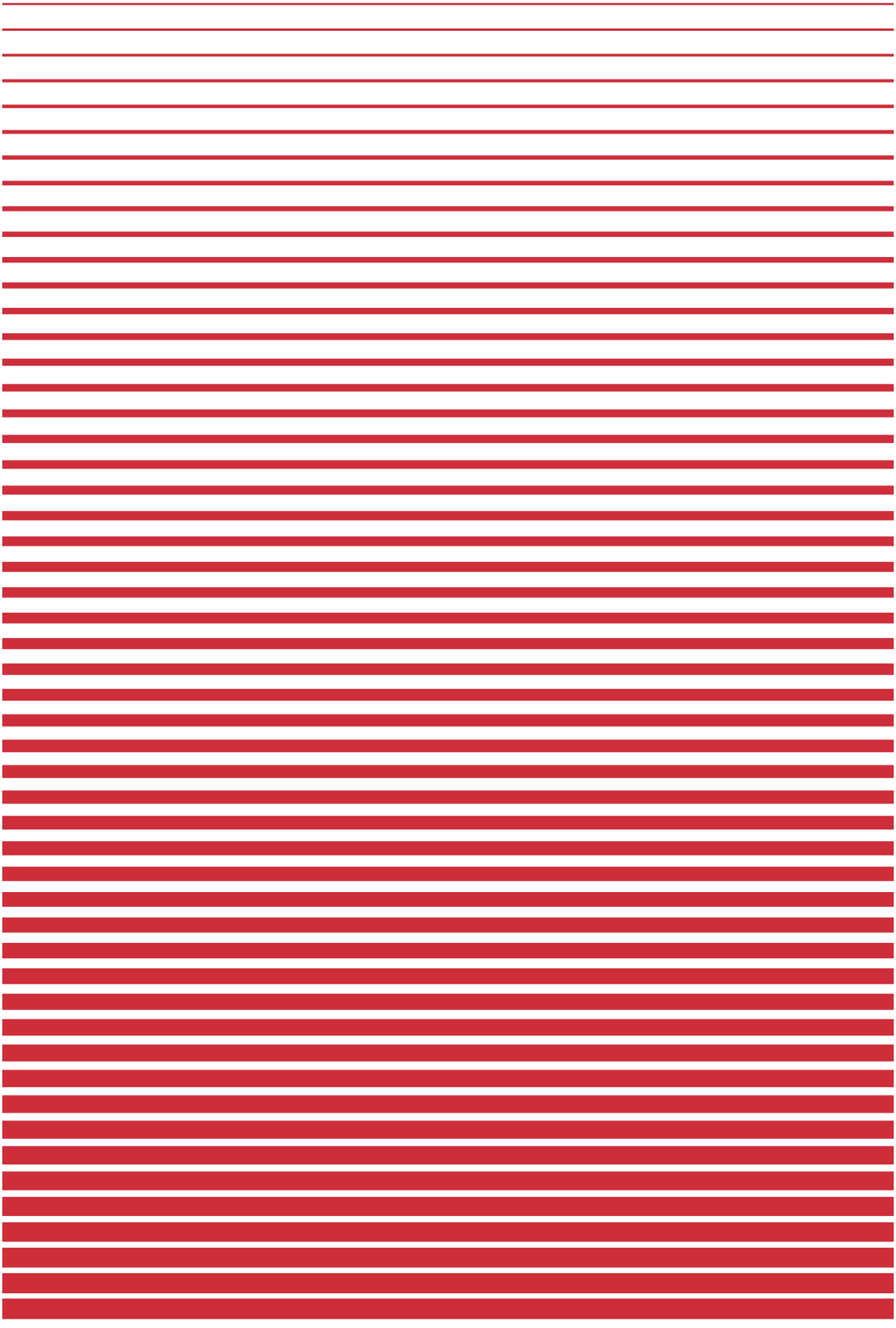
5. All medical personnel, including medical residents, who are currently on strike or have left their workplaces must return to their duties within 48 hours and faithfully perform their responsibilities. Violators shall be punished under the Martial Law Act.

6. Measures shall be taken to minimize inconvenience to the daily lives of ordinary citizens, except for anti-state forces and other elements seeking to overthrow the constitutional order.

Any person who violates this proclamation may be arrested, detained, or subjected to search and seizure without a warrant pursuant to Article 9 (Special Powers of the Martial Law Commander) of the Martial Law Act, and shall be punished in accordance with Article 14 (Penalties) of the same Act.

December 3, 2024

Park An-su
General, Republic of Korea Army
Martial Law Commander



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Jungmin Choi is a peace activist based in Seoul and the author of the CNCR Special Report *Six Hours and Beyond: Civil Resistance Against Democratic Backsliding in South Korea*. For some 25 years she has organized against militarism in South Korea. She co-founded the country's conscientious objection movement and, as a campaigner and nonviolence trainer at World Without War, has worked on arms trade monitoring and military greenhouse gas emissions. She is a Council member of War Resisters' International and holds an MA in Peace and Reconciliation Studies from Coventry University.

SIX HOURS.
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At 10:27 p.m. on December 3, 2024, South Korea's president declared martial law on live television. Within the hour, thousands of ordinary citizens rushed to the National Assembly. They stood before armed soldiers, built barricades and helped lawmakers climb the walls to reach the chamber. By dawn, the vote had been cast and martial law had collapsed. It took only six hours.

Six Hours and Beyond argues that this was no miracle. Drawing on the memory of Gwangju in 1980, the democratic uprising of 1987 and decades of candlelit protest, Jungmin Choi shows how a society quietly builds the habits, networks and convictions that allow it to defend democracy in a single night, and what it takes to keep defending it in the months that follow.

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