

South Korean president faces second impeachment vote

AFP –

South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol bows while delivering an address at the Presidential Office in Seoul (Handout) (Handout/South Korean Presidential Office/AFP)

South Korean lawmakers vote Saturday on whether to impeach President Yoon Suk Yeol over his failed martial law bid, in a second parliamentary showdown that remains too close to call.

Protests demanding Yoon step down kicked off around midday outside the National Assembly, which will vote around 4:00 pm (0700 GMT) on an impeachment resolution for “insurrectionary acts” – a week after a first attempt to remove Yoon for the martial law debacle failed.

“I was too furious since last week so I had to come to (the National Assembly) today,” Yoo Hee-jin, 24, told AFP.

“If Yoon isn’t impeached today, I’ll return next week,” she said, adding that “I’ll keep coming every week until it happens.”

Yoon has vowed to fight “until the very last minute” and doubled down on unsubstantiated claims the opposition is in league with the country’s communist foes.

Two hundred votes are needed for the impeachment to pass, meaning opposition lawmakers must convince eight parliamentarians from Yoon’s conservative People Power Party (PPP) to switch sides. Seven have pledged to do so.

– ‘Defend democracy’ –

Local media have reported that many lawmakers are still making up their minds.

The main opposition Democratic Party on Saturday said a vote for impeachment was the “only way” to “safeguard the Constitution, the rule of law, democracy and South Korea’s future”.

“We can no longer endure Yoon’s madness,” spokeswoman Hwang Jung-a said.

At the rally outside parliament supporting impeachment, volunteers gave out free hand warmers to fight the sub-zero temperatures, as well as coffee and food.

K-pop singer Yuri of the band Girl’s Generation – whose song “Into the New World” has become a protest anthem – said she had pre-paid for food for fans attending the demonstration.

“Stay safe and take care of your health!” she said on a superfan chat platform.

One protester said she had rented a bus so that parents at the rally could use it to change diapers and feed their babies.

On the other side of Seoul near the central Gwanghwamun square, thousands rallied in support of Yoon, blasting patriotic songs and waving South Korean and American flags.

– Insurrection claims –

Should his impeachment be approved, Yoon would be suspended from office while South Korea’s Constitutional Court deliberates.

Prime Minister Han Duck-soo would step in as the interim president.

The court would then have 180 days to rule on Yoon’s future.

If it backs his removal, Yoon would become the second president in South Korean history to be successfully impeached.

But there is also precedent for the court to block impeachment. In 2004, then-president Roh Moo-hyun was removed by parliament for alleged election law violations and incompetence, but the Constitutional Court later reinstated him.

The court currently only has six judges, meaning their decision must be unanimous.

And should the vote fail, Yoon can still face “legal responsibility” for the martial law bid, Kim Hyun-jung, a researcher at the Korea University Institute of Law, told AFP.

“This is clearly an act of insurrection,” she said.

“Even if the impeachment motion does not pass, the president’s legal responsibilities under the Criminal Code... cannot be avoided.”

– Defiant –

Yoon has remained unapologetic and defiant as the fallout from his disastrous martial law declaration has deepened and an investigation into his inner circle has widened.

On Friday, prosecutors said they had arrested a military commander who headed the Capital Defence Command.

The Seoul Central District Court also issued arrest warrants for the national police chief and the head of the city’s police, citing the “risk of destruction of evidence”.

Yoon’s approval rating – never very high – has plummeted to 11 percent, according to a Gallup Korea poll released Friday.

The same poll showed that 75 percent now support his impeachment.

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