

South Korea in political crisis after president resists arrest

AFP- South Korea's political leadership was in uncharted territory Saturday after the sitting president resisted arrest over a failed martial law decree days before the warrant expires.

In scenes of high drama on Friday, Yoon Suk Yeol's presidential guards and military troops shielded the former star prosecutor from investigators, who called off their arrest attempt citing safety concerns.

The South Korean president was impeached and suspended last month after the bungled martial law declaration – a political move swiftly overturned by parliament – with a separate warrant later issued for his arrest.

“There was a standoff. While we estimated the personnel blocking us to be around 200, there could have been more,” an official from the investigation team said Friday on condition of anonymity.

“It was a dangerous situation.”

Yoon faces criminal charges of insurrection, one of a few crimes not subject to presidential immunity, meaning he could be sentenced to prison or, at worst, the death penalty.

If the warrant is carried out, Yoon would become the first sitting South Korean president to be arrested.

– Arrest showdown –

Since his impeachment, Yoon has holed up in his presidential residence in the capital Seoul, where he has refused to emerge

for questioning three times.

The unprecedented showdown – which reportedly included clashes but no shots fired – left the arrest attempt by investigators in limbo with the court-ordered warrant set to expire on Monday.

Officials from the Corruption Investigation Office (CIO), probing Yoon over his martial law decree, could make another bid to arrest him before then.

But if the warrant lapses, they may apply for another.

The Constitutional Court slated January 14 for the start of Yoon's impeachment trial, which if he does not attend would continue in his absence.

Former presidents Roh Moo-hyun and Park Geun-hye never appeared for their impeachment trials.

Yoon's lawyers decried Friday's arrest attempt as "unlawful and invalid", and vowed to take legal action.

Two top officials from Yoon's presidential security service also refused a police request to appear for questioning on Saturday, citing the "serious nature" of protecting him, the service said in a statement sent to AFP.

Experts said investigators could wait for greater legal justification before attempting to arrest the suspended president again.

"It may be challenging to carry out the arrest until the Constitutional Court rules on the impeachment motion and strips him of the presidential title," Chae Jin-won of Humanitas College at Kyung Hee University told AFP.

– 'Stable path' –

South Korean media reported that CIO officials had wanted to

arrest Yoon and take him to their office in Gwacheon near Seoul for questioning.

After that, he could have been held for up to 48 hours on the existing warrant. Investigators would have needed to apply for another arrest warrant to keep him in custody.

Yoon has remained defiant and told his right-wing supporters this week he would fight “to the very end” for his political survival.

By the time investigators arrived to arrest Yoon, he had layered his presidential compound with hundreds of security forces to prevent it.

Around 20 investigators and 80 police officers were heavily outnumbered by around 200 soldiers and security personnel linking arms to block their way.

A tense six-hour standoff ensued until Friday afternoon when the investigators were forced to U-turn.

The investigators said in a statement on Friday they would ask Finance Minister Choi Sang-mok, who was installed as acting president a week ago, to back the warrant.

The weeks of political turmoil have threatened the country's stability.

South Korea's key security ally, the United States, called for the political elite to work towards a “stable path” forward.

National Security Council spokesman John Kirby on Friday reaffirmed Washington's commitment to maintaining bilateral ties.

Outgoing US Secretary of State Antony Blinken is scheduled to hold talks in Seoul on Monday, with one eye on US-South Korea relations and another on nuclear-armed North Korea.

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