

South Korea's president in court as investigators seek to extend detention

AFP- Impeached South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol was in court for the first time Saturday for a crucial hearing that will decide whether to extend his detention as investigators probe his failed martial law bid.

Yoon's supporters rallied outside the court and scuffled with police as he arrived in a blue van, weeks after throwing the nation into chaos by attempting to suspend civilian rule.

The president's December 3 martial law bid lasted just six hours, with lawmakers voting it down despite him ordering soldiers to storm parliament to stop them.

Yoon was subsequently impeached by parliament and resisted arrest for weeks, holed up in his guarded residence until he was finally detained Wednesday in a dawn raid.

South Korea's first sitting president to be detained, Yoon refused to cooperate during the initial 48 hours detectives were allowed to hold him.

But the disgraced president remains in custody after investigators requested a new warrant Friday to extend his detention.

He decided to appear in court "with the intention of restoring his honour", the president's lawyer Yoon Kab-keun told AFP before the hearing.

A spokesperson for Seoul Western District Court later confirmed to AFP that the hearing commenced with the president in attendance.

After reviewing the request to extend Yoon's detention, a judge is expected to announce her decision Saturday night or early Sunday.

Outside the court, AFP journalists saw crowds of Yoon's backers waving flags and holding "release the president" placards.

Police officers formed a chain to prevent them reaching the court entrance, which has been closed to the public since Friday evening over safety concerns.

– More legal woes –

If approved, as expected, the new warrant would likely extend Yoon's detention by 20 days.

This would give prosecutors time to formalise an indictment for insurrection, a charge that could see him jailed for life or executed if found guilty.

If indicted, the president would probably be detained for the duration of the trial.

Once "the warrant is issued this time, (Yoon) will likely be unable to return home for an extended period," political commentator Park Sang-byung told AFP.

Yoon said Wednesday he had agreed to leave his compound to avoid "bloodshed", but that he did not accept the legality of the investigation.

He has refused to answer investigators' questions, with his legal team saying the president explained his position on the day he was arrested.

The president has also been absent from a parallel probe at the Constitutional Court, which is mulling whether to uphold his impeachment.

If the court rules against Yoon, he will lose the presidency and elections will be called within 60 days.

He did not attend the first two hearings this week, but the trial, which could last months, will continue in his absence.

Although Yoon won the presidential election in 2022, the opposition Democratic Party has a majority in parliament after winning legislative polls last year.

The Democratic Party has celebrated the president's arrest, with a top official calling it "the first step" to restoring constitutional and legal order.

AFP