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South Korea's Uneven Path Toward Democratic Resilience

Woo-jin Kang (Kyungpook National University)

Introduction

The date of December 3, 2025, has been identified as the first anniversary of the event that shocked the world. Precisely one year ago, the incumbent president of the Republic of Korea, Yoon Suk-yeol, declared martial law in an attempt to stage a praetorian coup. The president's attempt to seize power was promptly countered by mass civic resistance and the National Assembly's swift vote to revoke the unconstitutional martial law order. Following a failed attempt and the defection of a faction of the ruling party, the Assembly ultimately approved the impeachment motion against President Yoon.
In the wake of these events, the Constitutional Court engaged in protracted deliberations, while citizens continued to demonstrate in public squares, thereby sustaining what would later come to be known as the "Cheering-Stick and Kisses Revolution." Following an extensive 111-day period of meticulous review, the Court delivered a unanimous ruling that resulted in the president's removal from office. Consequently, the individual who had endeavored to assume an authoritarian role was held accountable through a combination of democratic resistance and constitutional adjudication. The impeachment proceedings led to the second snap presidential election in South Korea in June 2025, which resulted in the victory of Democratic Party candidate Lee Jae-myung. Consequently, legal accountability was followed by political accountability.

The previous year will be recalled as a pivotal moment in the evolution of contemporary Korean democracy. In a statement commemorating the first anniversary of the December 3 martial-law declaration, President Lee Jae-myung remarked that "the Republic of Korea is now writing a chapter of world-historical significance. The "Revolution of Light" exemplified by the Korean people is establishing a new global standard for democracy." He further elaborated, stating, "It is my firm conviction that the Korean people, who have demonstrated an unparalleled capacity for peaceful resolution in the face of a democratic crisis of unmatched proportions in the annals of world history, are unequivocally deserving of the Nobel Peace Prize."[1]

The president, who has been described as authoritarian, has been removed from office, and legal proceedings against him and his collaborators are currently underway. When confronted with an existential threat, the Korean democracy demonstrated an extraordinary capacity for civic mobilization

[1] https://www.korea.kr/news/policyNewsView.do?newsId=148955771&pWise=sub&pWiseSub=C1

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and institutional self-correction.

Nevertheless, a critical question persists: The central question guiding this inquiry is whether the Korean democracy has genuinely overcome the attempted insurrection and achieved full restoration. Notwithstanding the substantial progress achieved in the past year, the path to achieving complete democratic resilience remains arduous, contentious, and unfinished. In the context of the recently established People's Sovereignty Government, South Korea's democratic system is confronted with the extraordinary challenge of legally adjudging a coup attempt that is driven by self-serving interests and subsequently addressing the insurrection that has ensued. It is incumbent upon the government to address the public's demand for a swift resolution to the crisis through democratic procedures and institutions. This is the only way to restore the legitimacy that the previous administration had compromised through its partisan use of state apparatuses. Moreover, the nation is currently grappling with the additional challenge of establishing a democratic majority coalition,[2] a task that remained unaccomplished during the 21st presidential election.

Despite South Korea's demonstrated resilience in recovering from its democratic crisis, the nation is currently grappling with three significant challenges: the rise of far-right extremism, the erosion of constitutionalism, and the escalation of political polarization. It is imperative for South Korea to address these challenges if it is to successfully transition to a stable liberal democracy.

The Far-Right Turn of the People Power Party

A comparison of the outcomes of the previous snap election in May 2017, held in the aftermath of President Park Geun-hye's impeachment, and those of the presidential election in June 2025, which followed the impeachment of President Yoon Suk-yeol, reveals a striking disparity. During the impeachment proceedings against Park, the ruling party experienced a schism over the issue of impeachment, with a faction advocating for reform departing to establish the Bareun Party. An overwhelming majority of political actors and citizens expressed support for the impeachment of a corrupt leader who had privatized powers entrusted to her for public purposes. Consequently, a democratic majority coalition, founded on shared commitments to constitutionalism and democratic norms, came to the fore. This coalition manifested itself in the electoral results, as evidenced by the combined vote share of the pro-impeachment candidates: Moon Jae-in (41.08%) of the Democratic Party, Sim Sang-jung (6.17%) of the Justice Party, Ahn Cheol-soo (21.41%) of the People's Party, and Yoo Seung-min (6.76%) of the Bareun Party. This combined vote share amounted to approximately 75 percent. In contrast, Hong Joon-pyo of the former ruling Liberty Korea Party received only 24.03 percent of the vote.

The advent of a reformist conservative bloc gave rise to the anticipation that Korean democracy would advance toward a novel stage of "ambidextrous democracy," wherein progressives and conservatives—while sharing core democratic principles—would engage in competition over

[2] Recent comparative studies demonstrate that opposition forces are most likely to defeat a backsliding incumbent when they construct an early, broad, pre-electoral, cross-ideological big-tent coalition during the intermediate stage of democratic erosion—a finding that, in the Korean context, highlights the imperative of assembling a timely prodemocratic majority before crises such as the December 3 martial-law attempt and the polarized 21st presidential election further tilt the institutional playing field beyond repair (Feldman and McCoy 2024). When a crisis unfolds amid intense political polarization, assembling a post-partisan, broad-based pro-democratic majority coalition becomes all the more essential to avert further deterioration and to facilitate democratic restoration.

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substantive democratic programs.[3] However, the reformist conservative forces were unable to maintain their political viability. During the subsequent five years under the Moon Jae-in administration, Korean democracy experienced a deepening of political polarization—particularly affective polarization—and, in many respects, regressed to the period of the pre-Candlelight uprising.

During the Moon Jae-in government, which adopted the moniker of the "candlelight government," the escalating affective polarization deepened into a severe vitocracy, eventually paving the way for a conservative return to power. Following the anti-impeachment rallies in support of Park Geun-hye, there has been a gradual and notable expansion in the presence of far-right groups. Until the late 2010s, mainstream conservative parties maintained a certain distance from these extremist street movements, whose voices remained marginal. The pivotal moment that signaled a shift in the political landscape was the ascension of the Yoon Suk-yeol administration in 2022. The subject's professional background, which includes a tenure as Chief Prosecutor's Office under the administration of Moon Jae-in, has been characterized by an inclination toward authoritarian practices.

The general elections in April 2024 were of critical importance for President Yoon. Significant policy failures, including a sudden surge in medical student enrollment and persistent controversies surrounding his spouse, contributed to the party's substantial electoral losses. They secured a mere 108 seats in the National Assembly, out of a total of 300 seats, indicating a significant decline in their representation. Faced with a parliamentary minority status, Yoon's ruling bloc adopted a stance of intransigence, exercising the veto power against bills proposed by the opposition parties. Conversely, opposition parties on the progressive side impeached cabinet ministers on multiple occasions and reduced the budget allocated for his office. In the midst of a prevailing political stagnancy and social seclusion, President Yoon has adopted a strategy that incorporates the use of extreme narratives, far-right street demonstrations, and right-leaning YouTube content creators to bolster his position. The regime's actions were justified under the rhetoric of resisting "left-wing dictatorship" and defending "liberal democracy." This discursive strategy drew upon long-standing anti-North Korean and anti-communist ideology, which since the 2000s had nurtured both "old" and "new right" groups.

Following the impeachment of Park, a significant number of right-wing groups have undergone a radicalization process, establishing substantial influence on digital platforms. A notable development has been the evolution of certain fundamentalist Christian groups into extremist political organizations, which have established connections with far-right youth communities. The recent coup d'état in South Korea has been interpreted by certain factions as a defensive maneuver against an alleged "opposition legislative dictatorship." These groups have characterized the action as a noble defense of liberal democracy, and they have mobilized mass protests in support of the new regime. Confronted with escalating political crises, the ruling conservatives increasingly relied on these radical forces as a paramilitary base. During his three-year tenure, the conservative party evolved into a form of power-conservatism that was increasingly influenced by extremist elements. This shift was further solidified by the strategic realignment of the party in response to the lessons from Park's downfall, which emphasized the notion that internal division could lead to systemic collapse. In contrast to the 2017 scenario, hardline factions prevailed within the party during the impeachment

[3] This concept is an adaptation of Schmitter's idea that democratization, on the one hand, triggers a universal set of norms, events, processes, and symbols, while, on the other hand, it constitutes a much more particularistic process of 'realistic' adaptation to the structural and historical conditions of individual countries (Schmitter and Sika 2016).

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proceedings, overtly aligning themselves with radical street movements. For instance, the People Power Party's presidential candidate, Kim Moon-soo, explicitly opposed the impeachment of a leader who had staged a pro-regime coup.

South Korea has historically experienced the presence of radical right-wing activism in online spaces, such as Ilbe. These groups, already prone to violent provocations during political crises such as the Sewol Ferry tragedy and the 2016 impeachment rallies, escalated further under Yoon. The riot that occurred at West Seoul Court on January 19, 2025, signified an unparalleled direct attack on a constitutional institution, thereby indicating a substantial rupture. A similar phenomenon to that observed in the United States under Trump was witnessed, marked by the convergence of far-right social movements and conservative parties, leading to an escalation in partisan radicalization. This phenomenon, termed "social movement partyism" by Van Dyke et al. (2024), involves a symbiotic relationship between political parties, which provide structured opportunities, and social movements, which mobilize support through a reciprocal exchange of opportunities and mobilization.

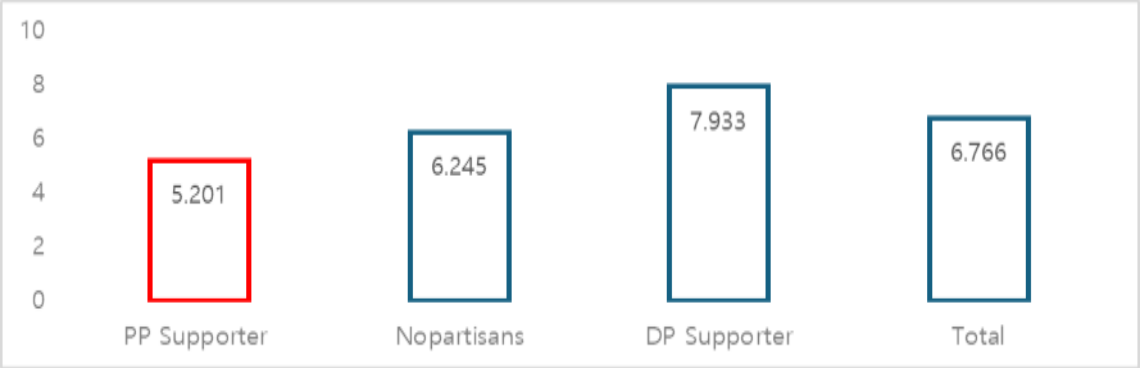
Despite the fact that approximately six months have elapsed since the inauguration of the Lee Jae-myung government, the People Power Party has engaged in extra-parliamentary rallies in overt alliance with extremist groups. At these rallies, demonstrators have been heard to recite slogans such as "June 3 rigged election" and "Invalidate Lee Jae-myung's election!" The phrases "Yoon Again" and "eradicate communism" were displayed alongside each other, accompanied by the flags of the political party. The infiltration of the party by politicized religious sects, including the Jun Kwang-hoon faction, Shincheonji, and the Unification Church, has been systematic. Concurrently, far-right activists have been building international ties with counterparts in the United States and beyond. In an address delivered on the first anniversary of the martial law declaration, the leader of the People Power Party attributed the imposition of martial law to the Democratic Party's parliamentary obstruction and "legislative tyranny" (Hani 2025/11/28).[4]

The radicalization of the People Power Party, characterized by its right-wing orientation, has precipitated substantial political ramifications. A recent survey administered by the KNU Democracy Research Center in October 2025 sought to assess respondents' perceptions of a recent violent incident that transpired at the Western District Court. The survey utilized a scale ranging from 0 to 10, with 0 representing a "legitimate act of civic resistance necessary to defend the rule of law" and 10 representing a "violent and anti-constitutional act that undermined the democratic order." The survey's findings indicated that the average rating among all respondents was 6.766. Conversely, the average score among supporters of the People Power Party exhibited a precipitous decline, reaching 5.20. Furthermore, 33.18 percent of the respondents (N = 1,000) expressed agreement with the assertion that the 21st presidential election was tainted by fraud or manipulation. Conversely, among supporters of the People Power Party, the proportion endorsing this view exhibited a marked increase, reaching 63.52 percent.

[4] Similarly, in a survey conducted of People Power Party legislators on the first anniversary of the martial-law crisis, only 48.2 percent of respondents—86 participants out of 107 legislators contacted, with 30 refusing to be interviewed—identified President Yoon's misguided decisions as the primary cause of the emergency declaration. A further 37.5 percent reported that the Democratic Party was responsible, aligning with President Yoon's justificatory framing. (Moonhwailbo 2025/12/01).

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<Figure 1> Attitudes toward the Violent Attack at the Western District Court



Source: Survey on Democratic Values and Attitudes (KNU Democracy Research Center, Oct 2025)

Note: How would you evaluate the violent protest and breach of the Seoul Western District Court that took place on January 19, 2025?" Responses were measured on a scale from (1) "a legitimate form of civic resistance undertaken to protect the rule of law" to (10) "a violent and anti-constitutional act that damaged democratic order."

The viability of attaining substantial democratic resilience is contingent upon the primary opposition party—along with the societal segments aligned with it—abandoning extremist postures and reaffirming their commitment to the fundamental tenets of democratic governance.

Erosion of the Legitimacy of Constitutionalism

Since the advent of democracy, the Republic of Korea (hereafter South Korea) has witnessed three attempts to impeach a sitting president. Across these episodes, democracy and constitutionalism—one rooted in the principle of majority rule and the other in the rule of law—interacted in ways that revealed both tension and mutual reinforcement.

The initial impeachment attempt targeting President Roh Moo-hyun was ultimately rejected by the Constitutional Court. In arriving at this decision, the Court made a clear distinction between political responsibility and legal responsibility, thereby establishing the constitutional criteria for impeachment. In this capacity, it functioned as an institutional counterweight, mediating between democratic legitimacy and legal formalism.

In the case of President Park Geun-hye, although the impeachment process unfolded against the backdrop of mass candlelight demonstrations, the Court did not incorporate the protesters' demands into its legal reasoning. Nevertheless, the court's unanimous ruling effectively translated the democratic legitimacy manifested in the civic mobilization into the domain of constitutionalism.

In contrast to the two earlier cases, the impeachment of President Yoon unfolded under fundamentally different conditions. The attempted self-coup by a sitting president was immediately thwarted by the direct resistance of citizens and the National Assembly's swift decision to nullify the declaration of martial law. Subsequent to this initial development, an escalating confrontation ensued among pro-coup factions, opposition forces, and citizens engaged in unwavering mass resistance. In the face of persistent civic pressure, the National Assembly ultimately passed the articles of impeachment following two rounds of voting.

Upon the case's referral to the Constitutional Court, there was a pronounced polarisation of

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political elites and public opinion regarding the issue of removing a president who had endeavored to subvert the constitutional order. This dynamic stood in stark contrast to the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye, in which approximately 75 percent of the public supported her removal and even the ruling party fractured in the face of overwhelming societal consensus. Despite the variability in the precise figures across different surveys, opposition to Yoon's impeachment consistently ranged from 30 to 40 percent.[5]

The protracted impeachment proceedings and the retirement of several justices have led to heightened concerns regarding the politicization of the Constitutional Court's deliberations. The acting head of state's delay in appointing judges, in conjunction with mounting tensions between the National Assembly and an executive branch functioning under provisional leadership following the president's impeachment, has led to an intensification of the prevailing institutional instability.

The case of President Yoon demonstrates that the primary threat to South Korea's stability does not stem from the impeachment proceedings observed in certain Latin American countries. Rather, it originates from the deliberate exploitation of procedural loopholes and institutional ambiguities to impede or manipulate constitutional processes. This dynamic has the effect of intensifying the inherent tension between democracy and constitutionalism, and it poses a significant threat to democratic stability. As delays in the impeachment proceedings persisted, both politicians and members of the public began advocating for the issue to be resolved through a national referendum (Hankyoreh21. 2025/March/21).

During the administration of Yoon Suk-yeol, the exercise of prosecutorial power exhibited a discernible partisan bias, resulting in a series of criminal indictments against Democratic Party leader Lee Jae-myung. These indictments encompassed charges pertaining to alleged violations of election laws, involvement in the Daejang-dong development scandal, and the purported third-party payment of expenses for a proposed visit to North Korea. The case that exerted the most significant influence on the presidential race was the public-official election law indictment. Just over a month before the election, the Supreme Court's Grand Bench, without introducing any new evidence, overturned the High Court's acquittal and remanded the case with a finding of guilt. This decision was procedurally unprecedented in both its timing and haste, and it dramatically intensified political uncertainty. Following extensive controversy, the High Court decided to postpone Lee's retrial until after the election, thereby avoiding an escalation of partisan conflict. However, this maneuver precipitated a novel constitutional discourse concerning the scope and import of the non-prosecution privilege guaranteed to the president-elect under Article 84 of the Constitution.

The Supreme Court's unusually expeditious handling of Lee Jae-myung's case—culminating in a remand for conviction under Chief Justice Cho Hee-dae following an expedited referral to the Grand Bench and the retirement of key justices—raised significant concerns regarding procedural irregularities, potential political interference, and the erosion of judicial neutrality. The judiciary's abrupt intervention resulted in a disruption of the delicate balance between democratic electoral processes and the principles of constitutionalism (Diplomat May07/2025).

The request for an arrest warrant for former President Yoon Suk-yeol, issued in the aftermath of the December 3 martial law crisis and his subsequent impeachment, generated unprecedented

[5] For instance, Gallup Korea reported that opposition to impeachment increased from 21 percent in the second week of December 2024 to 32 percent by the second week of January 2025, marking a notable rise over a one-month period (Korean Gallup Daily Opinion 608).

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political and legal repercussions. The special prosecutor asserted the necessity of compulsory measures on the grounds of grave offenses—including the mobilization of military forces for an alleged insurrectionary purpose and multiple counts of abuse of authority—whereas Yoon categorically rejected the allegations as "political persecution" and refused to comply with summonses. During the substantive proceedings, the court and the special prosecutor diverged markedly in their assessment of evidentiary credibility, the legal threshold for establishing insurrectionary intent, and the permissible scope of coercive investigative measures. This divergence led to an intensification of debates over procedural legitimacy and judicial neutrality. Yoon's refusal to submit to arrest, in conjunction with the interpretive disjunction between the bench and the special prosecutor, exposed a pronounced fissure between the imperatives of legal accountability and the logic of political self-justification. This ultimately placed the foundations of the rule of law in South Korean democracy under severe strain. Ultimately, the court granted the special prosecutor's request for an arrest warrant, citing the gravity of the offenses as well as the risks of evidence destruction and flight.

Furthermore, the release of Yoon Suk-yeol by Judge Ji Gui-yeon's panel, issued through an expedited and procedurally irregular route, exacerbated public apprehension that the judiciary was selectively intervening in politically sensitive cases. Despite being detained again on a separate charge, which mirrors the controversies surrounding the Supreme Court's remand decision in the Lee Jae-myung case, the ruling intensified concerns over political bias within the judiciary, the strategic manipulation of procedural discretion, and the consequent erosion of institutional neutrality and democratic legitimacy.

As the impeachment process and the subsequent judicial proceedings became increasingly politicized, the procedural legitimacy of constitutionalism was eroded. Judicial outcomes were selectively interpreted and accepted according to the interests of competing political camps, thereby reinforcing a form of partisan, outcome-oriented legitimacy at the expense of constitutional norms.

The Intensification of Affective Polarization and the Erosion of Democratic Foundations

The 2017 presidential election was marked by a Democratic majority coalition that sought to impeach Park, while the 2025 election was defined by a deepening divide between those who favored and those who opposed impeachment. The People Power Party candidate, Kim Moon-soo, openly opposed the impeachment of a president who had attempted a pro-regime coup under martial law. Nevertheless, Kim Moon-soo captured 41.2 percent of the vote, falling 8.27 percentage points behind the winning candidate, Lee Jae-myung. Throughout the campaign, public opinion polls consistently demonstrated that between 30 and 40 percent of respondents expressed opposition to impeachment, thereby underscoring a profoundly entrenched division in Korean society. The 2025 presidential election transpired in the context of pronounced affective polarization. According to Gallup Korea's post-election survey (Daily Opinion No. 624), the most frequently cited reason for supporting Kim Moon-soo was his 'morality/integrity' (33 percent). However, the second most prevalent rationale, with a nearly equivalent magnitude, was the simple 'dislike of Lee Jae-myung' (30 percent).

Despite the occurrence of the impeachment and the subsequent inauguration of President Lee Jae-myung, the situation did not demonstrate any signs of improvement. As previously mentioned, the former ruling party, which has since transformed into the primary opposition, has experienced a marked shift in its ideological orientation, with a notable rise in the influence of far-right forces.

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Despite facing legal and political ramifications, including impeachment and electoral defeat, the People Power Party has not exhibited a substantial shift in its ideological stance. Concurrently, despite the fact that the ruling Democratic Party—in conjunction with pro-Democratic minor parties—represents an overwhelming bloc of approximately 180 seats, there has been no indication of an effort to establish a comprehensive pro-democratic coalition that would encompass components of the People Power Party or the Reform Party. Instead of pursuing the establishment of a broader democratic alliance, the government has persisted in issuing warnings concerning the possible dissolution of political parties implicated in the insurrection. Moreover, the ruling Democratic Party is implementing a stringent policy of profoundly restructuring the prosecutor's office and the judiciary. This approach contrasts with President Lee's own more circumspect stance on these matters.

The increasing radicalization of the opposition, particularly among far-right groups, in conjunction with the inability of the ruling party to establish a comprehensive democratic coalition, has resulted in a pronounced escalation of affective polarization within the societal structure. This deepening affective divide is eroding the civic foundations of democratic governance.

Firstly, there was significant divergence in attitudes regarding the declaration of emergency martial law on December 3. According to the survey results reported in KNU 2025, the average rating given by respondents was 7.144 on a scale ranging from 0, indicating a legitimate exercise of the president's constitutional authority, to 10, denoting an unconstitutional and illegal act that violated democratic principles. However, the average score among People Power Party supporters decreased significantly to 4.59, in contrast to the 8.575 recorded among Democratic Party supporters.

Secondly, attitudes toward the Constitutional Court's impeachment ruling exhibited a similar pattern. The mean rating among all respondents was 6.91 on a scale ranging from 0, indicating a decision deemed 'very wrong,' to 10, indicating a decision deemed 'very appropriate.' However, among supporters of the People Power Party, the average value decreased significantly to 3.84. Furthermore, approximately half of the supporters of the People Power Party (46.37%) have indicated that they do not accept the Constitutional Court's decision regarding impeachment. In contrast, only 17.9 percent of all respondents expressed non-acceptance, while the corresponding figure among supporters of the Democratic Party was just 4.08 percent.

Thirdly, in a context marked by escalating partisan divisions over the acceptance of fundamental democratic principles, the underlying foundations of democracy have been substantially eroded. In response to the inquiry regarding the appropriateness of democracy for South Korea, respondents indicated a mean score of 6.424 on a scale ranging from 1 (completely inappropriate) to 10 (completely appropriate). In contrast, supporters of the People Power Party demonstrated comparatively lower levels of democratic suitability, with an average score of 5.843 on a scale from 1 to 10. In contrast, supporters of the Democratic Party exhibited a significantly higher average score of 7.232, suggesting a more pronounced adherence to democratic principles. Moreover, support for the democratic system has also exhibited a precipitous decline. A mere 63 percent of respondents expressed concurrence with the assertion that "democracy is always the better form of government." Among supporters of the People Power Party, the percentage of respondents who expressed agreement decreased to 57.54%, in comparison with 72.45% among supporters of the Democratic Party. This represents a discrepancy of 14.91 percentage points.

In moments of democratic crisis, the formation of a sustained pro-democratic majority coalition is imperative for ensuring democratic resilience. In the context of acute political polarization,

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particularly affective polarization, the mobilization of partisans, even in the name of democratic restoration, carries a risk of provoking counter-mobilization and further entrenching division.

Concluding Remarks

The notion of democratic recovery cannot be equated with the electoral removal of an authoritarian incumbent. Even in times of crisis, the social consensus that underpins the democratic system must remain sufficiently robust to withstand authoritarian erosion and to convert crisis into opportunity for higher-level democratic renewal. The transformation of Korean democracy's episodic resilience into stable institutional strength necessitates the forging of a broad, durable, and principled pro-democratic coalition.

It is imperative to recognize that the South Korean context necessitates not only a comprehensive political and legal reckoning concerning a failed authoritarian leader, but also the deliberate establishment of a pro-democratic majority coalition firmly grounded in shared democratic principles. It is imperative to recognize that such a coalition does not equate to merely amassing a legislative supermajority. On the one hand, an overwhelming parliamentary dominance enables the ruling bloc to legislate policy unilaterally by isolating an increasingly radicalized opposition. On the other hand, an overwhelming parliamentary dominance may impede the formation of a broader democratic coalition and risk reducing democracy to one-sided majoritarianism. Institutionalizing democratic resilience, therefore, necessitates traversing the "narrow corridor": the separation of extremist factions from mainstream political actors, the reinforcement of the universal legitimacy of constitutionalism, and the establishment of a cross-partisan pro-democratic majority coalition that extends beyond any immediate electoral configuration.■

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■ **Woo-jin Kang** is the Professor of Political Science at Kyungpook National University.

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Edited by Jaehyun Im

For inquiries:
Jaehyun Im, Research Associate
Tel. 82 2 2277 0746 (ext. 209) jhim@eai.or.kr

The East Asia Institute
1 Sajik-ro 7-gil, Jongno-gu, Seoul 03028, Republic of Korea
Phone 82 2 2277 1683 Fax 82 2 2277 1684
Email eai@eai.or.kr Website www.eai.or.kr

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