

# The Worrying Democratic Erosions in South Korea

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**In recent months, authorities have raided offices of press outlets publishing critical reports on President Yoon Suk-yeol.**

Americans may not know much about the South Korean President, Yoon Suk-yeol, but some will have noticed that he's not a bad singer. In April, when Joe and Jill Biden hosted Yoon and his wife, Kim Keon-hee, for a state dinner in Washington, D.C., Yoon ingratiated himself, East Asian-style, by performing a nostalgic ballad. During a round of musical performances, he brought a microphone to his lips, at Biden's invitation, and [launched](#) into an a-cappella version of one of his favorite tunes, "American Pie," by Don McLean: "A long, long time ago, I can still remember / How that music used to make me smile." Biden beamed and pumped his fists. Yoon looked the part of jovial statesman and ultimate U.S. ally.

South Korea is widely seen as an American-made democracy that, along with Japan, supports U.S. efforts to counter China in East Asia—and around the world. This trilateral unity was exhibited publicly, in August, when Biden met with Yoon and Fumio Kishida, the Prime Minister of Japan, at Camp David. But, since taking office last year, after being elected by a margin of less than one per cent, Yoon, a career prosecutor with no previous experience in politics, has started to scrape away protections for women, the right to associate and organize, and, most strikingly, freedom of the press.

The trouble started about a year ago, just a few months into Yoon's term, when he was caught swearing into a hot mike in New York, on the sidelines of the U.N. General Assembly. "Biden will be fucking humiliated if those pricks in Congress don't pass this," he said, in Korean, apparently referring to legislation that would fund a global health program. (Yoon's detractors had already nicknamed him Gaffe a Day.) The South Korean TV broadcaster MBC was the first to report the incident. Yoon's spokesperson went into denial mode, stating that the President had used a word that loosely rhymes with "Biden" (*nallimyeon*, meaning to cast out) and that the comment was directed at the Korean legislature, not the U.S. Congress. An ally of Yoon's filed a criminal-defamation complaint against MBC and affiliated journalists. (MBC said it was a "retaliatory investigation.") Two months later, Yoon banned MBC from joining the media pool on his flights to meetings of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the G-20.

Yoon has since intensified his attacks on the press. In May, police raided the home of Im Hyeon-ju, the MBC journalist who reported the hot-mike comment. (Her alleged offense, this time, was forwarding personal information about South Korea's justice minister to another journalist.) Earlier this month, prosecutors searched and confiscated materials from the offices of the investigative outlet Newstapa and the TV network JTBC, and from the homes of several journalists. The stated reason was again criminal defamation of Yoon. In early 2022, Newstapa had reported on the existence of a recorded interview in which a source alleges that Yoon, then a high-ranking prosecutor, covered up a banking and real-estate scheme. Yoon called this interview fake

news—claiming the tape may have been manipulated—and accused Newstapa and JTBC of circulating it just before the Presidential election to undermine his campaign. The Journalists Association of Korea and other media groups compared the recent raids to a “military operation” and condemned the ruling party’s disregard for “the rule of law.”

The Yoon administration doesn’t always approach the media with such hostility. South Korea’s newspapers and television channels are expressly political, and Yoon has shown favor to outlets aligned with his conservative People Power Party. In one instance, his government oversaw the indictment and firing of Han Sang-hyuk, a broadcast regulator who had scrutinized the license of TV Chosun, a network whose reports tend toward right-wing propaganda. (Han has denied the charges.) The man who replaced Han is now promising to scrub the Korean Internet of everything he deems “fake news.”

Yoon has also engaged in petty forms of reputation management. Last year, his culture ministry denounced a local cartoon contest for awarding a prize to a teen-ager who had drawn Yoon as a train steered by his wife, a businesswoman and socialite. (During the Presidential campaign, she vowed to have any reporter who spoke poorly of her husband put in jail; her mother is currently in prison for forging a financial document in a real-estate deal.) The government celebrated the recent opening of a “children’s garden”—at the defense-ministry compound, in central Seoul, where Yoon relocated the President’s office—by distributing coloring sheets that depicted Yoon and his wife being fawned over by various segments of the population, including puppies.

For many, Yoon’s self-absorption and eagerness to target the media are reminiscent of the country’s mid-century military dictatorship, which lasted until the nineteen-eighties. Local and national prosecutors went after reporters, publishers, student activists, labor organizers, and ordinary people as part of a vast anti-Communist dragnet. Many of those prosecutors facilitated arrests and torture by the police, the scope of which is still being catalogued. Prosecutors working for Yoon’s government have used their investigatory powers to intimidate and threaten to arrest politicians in the liberal opposition party, including Lee Jae-myung, who ran against Yoon last year. Lee came under investigation for bribery and corruption shortly after the election; he has denied all charges and staged a twenty-four-day hunger strike, calling the new government a “dictatorship by prosecutors.” Recently, the South Korean legislature voted to override Lee’s sovereign immunity, allowing for his arrest. (A court later rejected the warrant.) Yoon’s prosecutors have also gone after the leaders of progressive trade unions. Early this year, police raided dozens of union offices and private homes, accusing labor officials of violating South Korea’s National Security Act and coercing construction firms to use union workers.

When Yoon became President, many South Koreans who had participated in the *minjung*, or “people’s,” democracy movement of the nineteen-seventies and eighties could not believe that the nation was willing to elect a prosecutor. Early in his career, Yoon had worked on important corruption cases in the southern city of Daegu; later, he rose through the prestigious Seoul prosecutors’ office and, in 2019, the liberal President Moon Jae-in made him the country’s prosecutor general. Yoon soon began to pursue cases that benefitted the People Power Party. He cast himself as Moon’s chief antagonist and seized on an opening in the 2022 Presidential race. (South Korean Presidents are limited to a single five-year term.) During the campaign, Yoon capitalized on a backlash against women, blaming feminism for the nation’s frustrations with rising housing costs and dwindling upward mobility. He promised to eliminate the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (a move that is now pending) and did away with a gender quota established by Moon that called for thirty per cent of the President’s cabinet to be women. In addition to Yoon’s attacks on trade unions, his labor ministry will soon close dozens of support centers for immigrants, a growing and necessary part of the workforce in South Korea, whose birth rate is the lowest in the world.

Publicly, Biden has not betrayed any concern about Yoon's autocratic tendencies. "So much of the foreign-policy establishment was gleeful when Yoon was elected," Jake Werner, of the Quincy Institute, told me. The strategy of all-or-nothing competition with China has meant abiding the growth of other illiberal governments in the region. The White House, Werner said, has not dealt with the fact "that it's authoritarians who are welcoming the direction we're taking in foreign policy." Narendra Modi, of India, has been fêted by Washington, despite abetting Hindu-nationalist violence, revoking Kashmir's autonomous status, and censoring the media. Vietnam's President, Vo Van Thuong, was untouched by criticism over crackdowns on press and civil society during Biden's recent visit; police in Hanoi arrested an environmental campaigner a few days later. Yoon, too, is pushing South Korea in a repressive direction, back to the bad old days of the dictatorship, with no protest from his American partners.

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