

Digital Uprising

Social media and democracy: Reflections from South Korea's impeachment

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Bonn, 14 April 2025. In less than a decade, South Korea saw two presidents impeached through mass public uprisings. Korean citizens seem torn, feeling both deep shame that such leaders once represented the country, and powerful pride that citizens removed them from power through democratic means. The most recent impeachment of former President Yoon Suk-yeol, following his declaration of martial law on 3 December 2024, in attempt to retain power, culminated in his removal by the Constitutional Court on 4 April 2025. For 122 days, despite the bitter winter, countless citizens filled the streets, demanding accountability and defending what they saw as a grave threat to democracy.

What made this wave of protests unique was the visible and powerful presence of youth - especially young women. Frustrated by the former president's anti-feminist rhetoric and policies, they stepped forefront of the

movement. By blending K-pop culture and digital platforms, they transformed traditional protest into a vibrant, trendy, and inclusive form of civic expression. K-pop light sticks replaced candles as protest symbols, and playcards bore slogans in stylised Hangul (Korean alphabet) with global hashtags. Protesters sang and danced together, not just to oppose a president, but to imagine and perform the kind of society they wished to live in.

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Social media were at the heart of this transformation. Playlists were shared online before weekend gatherings, creating a space where older generations sang along with K-pop anthems while younger protesters learned traditional protest songs - a mutual exchange that strengthened intergenerational solidarity. Protesters who could not join physically prepaid drinks or meals at local cafés near protest sites for others to warm up. These acts of solidarity were coordinated and amplified through digital platforms, creating a sense of unity across both physical and virtual spaces. The message was clear: “We are not alone - we are one.”

However, social media also amplified divisions. Far-right influencers used platforms like YouTube and messaging apps to spread conspiracy theories and incite violence. They painted the impeachment as a leftist coup and attacked democratic institutions as illegitimate. Some even justified President Yoon's martial law as a necessary response to “national chaos”. These messages led to real-world consequences - most notably the violent storming of the Seoul Western District Court, reminiscent of the U.S. Capitol riots in 2021.

This dual nature of digital platforms - as tools of empowerment and disruption - is not unique to Korea. From the Arab Spring to the Black Lives Matter movement, we have seen how social media can galvanise change while also providing fertile ground for misinformation and polarisation. For instance, recent elections in Germany clearly demonstrated the potential

dangers of seemingly harmless messages that subliminally spread right-wing narratives using algorithms via TikTok that ultimately influence younger voters. Such strategies significantly contributed to the success of the far-right Alternative for Germany (ADF), which tripled the party's share among Germans aged 18 to 24 during the June 2024 European elections. Influences and blogs are crucial in creating networks that prioritise provocative content over facts thereby posing a growing threat to democracy. The Korean impeachment movements thus reflect a global phenomenon: democracy in the digital age is increasingly shaped by algorithms, virality and online culture.

Despite the flood of false information and agitation on social media, South Korea's democracy did not collapse – the Constitutional Court, as an independent and professional institution, served as a peaceful mechanism for resolving political crises. Of course, it was the widespread public protests that pushed the National Assembly to act and gave legitimacy to the Court's decision. This experience reaffirmed an important truth: democratic institutions function most effectively when combined with the democratic capacity and active participation of civil society.

South Korea's recent protest movement offers a vivid example of the potential of a connected citizenry. It shows us that democracy today is not just practised in parliaments or courtrooms, but also in digital plazas where hashtags replace headlines and solidarity is forged through shared playlists and viral posts. South Korea is not alone in facing political crises; tragically, many other countries are caught in war or under authoritarian regimes that threaten the safety and dignity of their citizens. As digital citizens of an interconnected world, we must now actively combat disinformation, foster media literacy through critical awareness, especially among young people, and help establish compelling counter-narratives to strengthen democratic values.