



A Political K-Drama Stuck on Repeat

The Challenges of Polarisation Facing the
Conservative Side of South Korean Politics

Photo: © NurPhoto, Imago.

In a Nutshell

Social polarisation in South Korea is profoundly shaping both politics and everyday life. Historical experiences, Confucian traditions, and current conflicts such as the brief imposition of martial law in 2024 are exacerbating tensions between the progressive and conservative camps. Economic uncertainty, rising living costs, and a strong dependence on international markets are increasing societal pressure.

Demographic change, extreme educational demands, and housing shortages are placing a particular burden on younger generations. At the same time, changing role models and structural disadvantages faced by women are reshaping social dynamics, while conscription and competition in the labour market

are fuelling a new form of antifeminism among some young men.

The conservative People Power Party is deeply divided internally. The conflict over how to address the legacy of martial law is paralysing the party, weakening its ability to act as an opposition force, and fuelling a struggle over direction between moderate forces and more radical supporters of former president Yoon Suk Yeol.

Despite these tensions, democratic institutions remain stable. Courts, the media, and the public continue to defend democratic principles, and political polarisation is not threatening the country's fundamental stability.

The Author



Henrik Braun is Head of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's Korea Office, based in Seoul.

For centuries, Korea could be understood as a kingdom that had sealed itself off in order to preserve political stability and protect itself against external threats. The country isolated itself from the outside world out of fear of a Japanese invasion. There are potential consequences here: Some traditions display remarkable longevity, and on closer inspection, at least traces of them can still be discerned today. Whether this is the root cause of the comparatively pronounced polarisation of Korean society and its party system is a matter of debate, but it is certainly conceivable. The legacy of Korean Confucianism is also likely to be a factor to some extent since many people still feel bound by its rules and are guided by them, be it consciously or unconsciously.

Triggered by the unexpected declaration of martial law by then-President Yoon Suk Yeol in December 2024, recent events in South Korea have given further momentum to the already-palpable polarisation. Issues affecting prosperity and economic growth in particular harbour considerable potential for further social tensions.

Foreign economic dependence and protectionism: Despite a provisional settlement in the tariff dispute that has been secured through investment commitments totalling 350 billion US dollars over several years, the protectionist ambitions of the United States remain a real threat, including tariffs of 25 per cent on passenger cars and of 50 per cent on steel. The unpredictability of the US administration also means that further demands remain possible at any time, such as in the area of burden sharing for security guarantees.

Security policy escalation involving North Korea: The deployment of North Korean troops to

Ukraine in April 2024 caused deep concern in South Korea: There are fears that North Korea could apply insights gained in modern warfare in Ukraine against the “hostile state” south of the 38th parallel and obtain access to modern military technology.

Economic stagnation and the housing crisis: Rising pressure resulting from an economic slowdown is another key factor. The won has lost around 26 per cent of its value since 2015. Developments in the property markets are of particular importance, especially in major cities. This applies above all to the Greater Seoul Metropolitan Area, which is known as Sudogwon – one of the most populous and densely populated metropolitan regions in the world. Housing prices rose by 16.1 per cent between January 2023 and April 2025 alone,¹ with a continuing upward trend. No other metropolitan area in the major industrialised countries (aside from city-states) has such a high proportion of the national population, which lies at 50.7 per cent.²

Demographic crisis: With increasing momentum, demographic developments will also continue to shape both politics and social cohesion in South Korea. In 2025, the country recorded the world's lowest birth rate, at 0.75 children per woman.³ Contributing factors include extreme performance pressure and intense competition in the labour market, the prohibitive costs of education and housing, and rigid role models in childcare.

Structural imbalances

Polarisation in South Korean society is driven by a combination of historical, political, and social factors. It has resulted from the interplay between the period of authoritarian rule (until 1987), rapid democratisation, impressive

economic and technological development over recent decades, and sharply divergent views on how to deal with North Korea. This divide is reinforced by differing generational lifestyles, conflicting political ideologies, and changing patterns of media consumption, with the latter item being a particularly extreme phenomenon among younger people. Older generations tend towards more conservative views and attach value to stable social status, while younger generations are more acutely affected by economic uncertainty and anxieties about the future, face high expectations, and adopt a more critical outlook.

Politically, polarisation is evident in the marked ideological separation of social groups, usually along the fault lines between the right-conservative and left-liberal blocs, which are currently represented by the People Power Party (PPP) on one side and the Democratic Party (Minju) on the other. A key role is played by opposing approaches and fundamentally divergent views regarding relations with North Korea. On one side are those who primarily view North Korea as a military threat that must be deterred in

partnership with the United States, with the goal being the complete denuclearisation of the North. Reunification is sometimes equated with a form of “takeover”. On the other side is the desire to reduce tensions through rapprochement, economic cooperation, and humanitarian assistance; to recognise the North’s security concerns; and to establish peaceful coexistence.

The political landscape is marked by intense conflict, with parties focusing less on social dialogue and more on mobilising their respective bases. This has resulted in highly ideologised electoral choices, thereby leaving little room for consensus, compromise, or mutual understanding between the camps.

The media have a key role to play here: Since older generations naturally rely more on traditional sources of information while younger people primarily use social media, filter bubbles and social fragmentation are reinforced. Additional pressure comes from economic fears, rising living costs, and generational conflicts, which further divide society. The atmosphere is further



Decisive moment: A mother prays for her child’s success in the national university entrance examination. The test determines the trajectory of future academic and career opportunities. [Photo: © Xinhua, Imago.](#)

inflamed by populist politicians. Taken together, these factors culminate in a level of social polarisation that makes South Korea appear more deeply divided today than ever before.⁴

Education – A major issue

It seems that in South Korea, hardly anything is of such outstanding importance as education. School pupils are subjected to the highest level of performance pressure, and vast sums are spent on private tutoring. The result of the university entrance examination (Suneung) is the sole determining factor when it comes to admission to a university. The aim is to gain admission to the prestigious SKY universities (i.e. Seoul National University, Korea University, and Yonsei University), whose graduates make up the elites in politics, major conglomerates (chaebols), and other top positions. Thus, when the nine-hour university entrance examination takes place in November each year, the public makes allowances: Shops, stock exchanges, and banks open later or not at all, and construction work is halted. The 2022 PISA test clearly shows the results of these efforts: South Korea ranks third, behind only Singapore and Japan.⁵

South Korea had the world’s second-highest suicide rate in 2021.

The pressure to perform well – which permeates society – has its consequences: Competition is to be kept at arm’s length in order to be able to cope with the pressure of one’s own ambitions and the expectations imposed by others. South Korea additionally had the world’s second-highest suicide rate in 2021.⁶

Women defy tradition

Another core issue also carries conflict potential: namely the traditional expectations placed on women – and the rejection of these expectations. The role of women in South Korea has changed

significantly over time. Traditionally, women were largely confined to their role within the family. As daughters, wives, or mothers, women were legally and socially dependent on male family members and were confined to the private sphere (i.e. household, care, child-rearing). Indeed, there was scarcely any room for any independent life outside this collective. However, South Korea’s rapid economic rise since the 1980s has enabled women to access academic education on equal footing with men. Higher education has provided access to qualified professions, thereby resulting in improved life prospects and career opportunities. Nevertheless, structural disadvantages at the workplace remain: Women are often discriminated against despite having the same qualifications as men, and they are additionally subject to career constraints. This situation is underscored by the fact that South Korea has the largest gender pay gap in the world: In 2023, the gap stood at 29.3 per cent.⁷ Against this background, it is hardly surprising that comparatively few women are found in top positions. Indeed, their share among the 100 largest Korean companies is only 6.5 per cent.⁸ Regardless, women continue to face long-established traditional expectations in society and families, where they tend to be seen in the role of housewife and mother. These expectations clearly run counter to reconciling work and family life. One reflection of this situation is the average age at marriage, which is continuing to rise in South Korea.

Fig. 1: Average age at marriage in South Korea

Year Age	1994	2004	2014	2024
Men	28,2	30,6	32,4	33,9
Women	25,1	27,6	29,8	31,6

Source: own illustration based on Textor, C. 2025: Median age at first marriage in South Korea from 1990 to 2024, by gender, Statista, 29 Nov 2025, in: <https://ogy.de/nex3> [5 Jan 2026].

As a consequence, women’s age at the birth of their first child has also risen significantly, from 26.23 years in 1993 to 33.08 years in 2024.⁹ This

development has resulted from more prolonged periods of education, career ambitions, and many women's desire to not focus exclusively on family life and to instead also participate in paid employment and to not lose sight of self-realisation entirely.

Young men tend to vote more conservatively.

As in Germany, having a small number of children also goes hand in hand with societal challenges in South Korea, such as population ageing and a growing shortage of young talent in the labour market. In addition, a great deal of resentment arises from the fact that many young men feel disadvantaged compared with women due to the country's compulsory military service. Currently lasting 18 to 21 months, compulsory military service applies to men from the age of 18, thereby delaying their education, their entry into working life, and thus also their career opportunities. Men argue that women can study or work without disruption during this time, while they themselves have to complete a demanding period of service. The result is a sense of frustration in a highly competitive labour market with only a limited number of good jobs. These young men see "reverse discrimination", particularly in the context of quotas for women and equal opportunity measures. The resulting mood has fuelled a trend of antifeminism that has meant that young men tend to vote more conservatively. They criticise support for women as unfair and in some cases blame it for the current low birth rates.

The party landscape

Political disarray is a paralysing and defining element of Korean politics. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as the "South-South division" in analogy to the "North-South division" of the Korean peninsula following the end of Japanese colonial rule in 1945.¹⁰ The term describes the irreconcilable split between political camps in South Korea, which severely

restricts the country's capacity for political action. This was particularly evident when, in the wake of the parliamentary elections in 2024, the opposition's blockade prevented then-President Yoon Suk Yeol – who was later removed from office – from implementing domestic policy objectives. The obvious irreconcilability is not accidental: Indeed, it has its roots in the consequences of the Korean War, which promoted rigid, militant anti-communism and produced a pronounced "friend-enemy" differentiation.¹¹ Given this starkly polarised mindset, it was not possible for any broad party-political spectrum to develop that was differentiated by substantive policy positions. There are certainly numerous parties, but they can generally be clearly assigned to one of the two camps. The small parties are mostly "one-hit wonders", while the larger parties (or more accurately, political currents) have appeared under changing names in almost every election.

What matters for a party's clout in the National Assembly is its ability to form a negotiating bloc consisting of at least 20 members of parliament. Smaller parties that do not reach this number of members also have the option to form an alliance in order to meet this minimum quorum. Having a negotiating bloc – or being part of one – is essential because it goes hand in hand with various rights and advantages that are denied to individual members and to very small numbers of members, including better financial resources and parliamentary speaking rights as well as participation in decision-making processes and in matters of rules of procedure. Without the required critical size in the National Assembly, political influence and relevance are close to zero. This explains why it is so important to belong to one of the two dominant currents in the National Assembly.

Regardless as to whether very small parties have succeeded in forming negotiating blocs in past legislative periods, they have had little significance in light of the dominant position of the progressive party (i.e. Minju or DPK) and the conservative party (now PPP). The National Assembly consists of members of parliament from several parties; thus, it formally follows the

Fig. 2: Distribution of seats held by parties in South Korea's National Assembly

Mandates after the election	22nd Assembly since 2024	21st Assembly 2020–2024	20th Assembly 2016–2020	19th Assembly 2012–2016
People Power Party	90			
People Future Party	18			
Democratic Alliance	14			
Rebuilding Korea Party	12			
New Reform Party	3			
New Future Party	1			
Progressive Party	1			
Minjoo Party of Korea		163		
United Future Party		84		
Future Korea Party		19		
Citizen Party		17		
Parti Minjoo ouvert		3		
Democratic Party of Korea	161		123	
People's Party		3	38	
Justice Party		6	6	
Saenuri Party			122	152
Democratic United Party				127
Unified Progressive Party				13
Liberty Forward Party				5
Independents		5	11	3
Total seats	300	300	300	300
Progressive	187	180	123	127
Conservative	111	103	122	157
Progressive + Conservative	298	283	245	284
Share of total mandates	99%	94%	82%	95%

Source: own illustration after IPU Parline: Republic of Korea. National Assembly, in: <https://ogy.de/gbar> [4 Feb 2026].

principles of a multi-party system. However, the clear dominance of the two political camps has resulted in a system revolving around only two parties that can be regarded as a de facto two-party system – a reasonable assessment given that over recent legislative periods (see table above), the two political currents have accounted for up

to 99 per cent of seats (2024) (2020: 94 per cent; 2016: 82 per cent; 2012: 95 per cent).

On the conservative, right-leaning side, there are essentially no parties competing with one another. The differences in opinion that of course exist are fought out between party wings under

the umbrella of the PPP itself. The irreconcilable and confrontational opposition¹² between the left and right political blocs in the country is mirrored in a similar way within the conservative camp itself. The spectrum ranges from more liberal, forward-looking, conciliatory positions on the moderate side to the so-called Asphalt Right – a term that describes a regressive, hardline conservative voter group that remains loyal to former president Yoon Suk Yeol within the PPP, often in the context of protests on the streets. Out of fear of marginalisation alone – meaning the loss of current political influence in parliament and also after future elections – both sides know that they depend on each other. At present, following the defection of one member, the PPP has 107 members of parliament. If, for example, the members of parliament who are still loyal to Yoon Suk Yeol were to split off, the remaining larger bloc could possibly fall below the threshold of 100 members (i.e. one-third of the total 300 members of parliament) – which is more than merely a psychologically significant figure – and could thereby lose the strategically important qualified minority in the context of constitutionally relevant legislation.

A majority within the conservative party view the declaration of martial law as a mistake.

The party is paralysed by its internal divisions. At the centre of the internal party dispute is how to deal with the events of the recent past, particularly, what position the party should take regarding the briefly imposed martial law that was in effect on 3 December 2024. On the one side are those who continue to support former president Yoon Suk Yeol, who was removed from office: They defend the declaration of martial law, were opposed to the impeachment proceedings, and naturally reject an apology. On the other side are those who have broken with Yoon and who have also been able to bring themselves to issue an apology. A majority within the party view the declaration of martial law as a mistake. Equally,

a majority also cast legal doubt on the subsequent impeachment proceedings against the former president. A first apology was issued by Kwon Young-se, who was appointed interim party leader at the end of 2024. A renewed apology – demanded in particular by the governing party – was issued by only a few members of parliament on the anniversary of martial law, which again drew criticism within their own camp. Ultimately, every new apology prolongs stigmatisation and makes it more difficult to regain political initiative. In this respect, the governing Minju Party of current president Lee Jae-myung has every reason to keep this backward-looking issue simmering in order to keep the opposition paralysed. As if that were not enough, public speculation about the constitutionality of the PPP – including considerations of initiating proceedings to ban the party – is increasing pressure, distracting from key challenges (e.g. the housing crisis, demography), and leading to unwanted publicity for the PPP. The current government's plans to reorganise the public prosecution offices can also be seen as an attempt to use these offices as instruments against the opposition PPP, particularly in connection with the review of martial law. Interested in nothing more than focusing on its role in opposition and keeping this issue out of the public eye, this divided party therefore remains on the defensive.

Between the camps within the PPP, there is ongoing, deep-seated animosity, with no prospect of it being overcome. Here too, it becomes apparent that mutual dislike activates each side's supporters far better and more sustainably than any problem-solving engagement with complex issues.¹³ What is lost is the necessary insight on both sides that their own convictions cannot be implemented 100 per cent. If compromise is not even possible within one's own camp, how is it supposed to be achieved across camps given an even broader political spectrum? There is currently no answer to this question.

There also appears to be a real danger that the conservative camp will enter – or has long since entered – a self-accelerating cycle that frustrates moderate party members and encourages them



Left or right: Voters in South Korea – as seen here during the presidential election in June 2025 – generally face clear-cut choices. A political centre hardly exists. Photo: © UPI Photo, Imago.

to leave politics, thereby strengthening the extremes and causing them to drift even further apart. As a result, the image that the party inevitably projects to voters is a sobering one. Any sense of wanting – or indeed, of being able – to govern the country responsibly can hardly be conveyed credibly given the party’s powerlessness in the face of internal centrifugal forces.¹⁴ Unsurprisingly, expectations of the party’s performance in the local elections in early June 2026 are pessimistic.

Outlook

The conservative camp currently lacks the tools and leadership figures needed to break free from the shackles of internal party conflict, to present a united front, and to set new priorities in a way

that would allow it to become attractive to a broad electorate once more. The unifying dislike of progressive president Lee Jae-myung alone – who continues to face legal problems – will not be sufficient to make meaningful progress. In the short term, there appears to be no improvement in sight. Precisely because the election campaign for the local elections on 3 June 2026 began at the start of the year, there will be little room for nuance or for the acknowledgement of complexity. After all, the campaign – and especially the period shortly before the elections – is the phase during which polarisation traditionally reaches a peak. This is also likely due to the fact that it is ultimately more promising to mobilise one’s own base and to get them to the polls than to offer swing voters a political alternative. The fact that this approach comes at a price – at least in the

long term – should be clear to all involved. While short-term self-preservation may seem expedient, it cannot replace the need for a coherent set of political convictions. However, those responsible may come to consider a paradigm shift: After a predictably painful defeat in the local elections, rather than conveying the impression of wanting to rid themselves of an unaddressed past by merely renaming the party, those responsible should instead face up to the facts, initiate a renewal process, and then go on to offer voters credible, forward-looking policy proposals.

Pronounced polarisation in parties and society is not unique to South Korea: Indeed, it can be observed in many countries. A comparison of the party systems in South Korea and Germany shows that the two bear little similarity. In South Korea, political currents have a long tradition, whereas parties do not. Korean political parties fail to foster the kind of intergenerational loyalty that parties in Germany can command.¹⁵ In Germany, political parties are also brands, and few would think lightly of changing a brand name, let alone of replacing it completely.

However, despite the polarisation that can be seen in society and politics, the stability of the country is not under threat. It is worth remembering that a certain degree of polarisation is not only inherent to democratic competition between parties, but also a necessity. After the developments of recent years, particularly since the brief period during which martial law was declared, South Korea can be said to have impressively fended off a massive attack on democracy.¹⁶ The value of democracy – and of political parties – appears to be very clearly understood by the population. The courts have fulfilled the role assigned to them. Their judgements have not been welcomed by all sides, but – and this is crucial – they have been accepted in principle. The public has taken a stand, both for democracy and for the country. It is an encouraging sign.

- 1 Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) 2025: Zentralbank sieht Gefahren wegen stark steigender Immobilienpreise in Seoul, 25 Jun 2025, in: <https://ogy.de/5rrs> [5 Jan 2026].
- 2 Lee, Jung-joo 2024: Over half of population resides in Seoul metropolitan area: data, The Korea Herald, 14 Feb 2024, in: <https://ogy.de/t2sv> [4 Feb 2026].
- 3 Muschter, René 2024: Südkorea: Fertilitätsrate von 1950 bis 2023 und Prognosen bis 2050, Statista, 3 Sep 2024, in: <https://ogy.de/l7v2> [5 Jan 2026].
- 4 Taiwan News 2025: South Korea deeply divided before June election, 25 Apr 2025, in: <https://t.ly/MjDjc> [5 Jan 2026].
- 5 Statistisches Bundesamt: PISA-Studie 2022, in: <https://ogy.de/3ivj> [5 Jan 2026].
- 6 Statistisches Bundesamt: Registered deaths from suicide, in: <https://ogy.de/s5bn> [5 Jan 2026].
- 7 OECD 2024: Gender wage gap, in: <https://ogy.de/ltxa> [5 Jan 2026].
- 8 KBS World 2025: Rekordzahl an Frauen in Geschäftsleitung der 100 größten Unternehmen, 5 Nov 2025, in: <https://ogy.de/j5i9> [5 Jan 2026].
- 9 지표누리저출생 통계지표 (statistical indicators for low birth rates) 2024: 여성의 평균출산연령 (average maternal age at childbirth), in: <https://ogy.de/iu51> [5 Jan 2026].
- 10 tagesschau.de 2024: "Das ist einer Demokratie unwürdig", interview with Dr Eric J. Ballbach, 4 Dec 2024, in: <https://ogy.de/oxvy> [5 Jan 2026].
- 11 Yun, Bee 2025: Südkoreas Demokratie im Stresstest: Der autoritäre Rückfall des Konservatismus, Bertelsmann Transformation Index, 9 Apr 2025, in: <https://ogy.de/g82c> [5 Jan 2026].
- 12 Yun, Bee 2024: In Südkorea werden Debatten wie Kriege geführt, Spiegel, 8 Jul 2024, in: <https://ogy.de/bgwp> [5 Jan 2026].
- 13 Ji, Da-gyum 2025: Martial law's animosity has outlived decree – and now defines political identity, The Korea Herald, 2 Dec 2025, in: <https://ogy.de/ocql> [5 Jan 2026].
- 14 Hwang, Joo-young 2025: Main opposition party weighs name change, alliance, The Korea Herald, 17 Dec 2025, in: <https://ogy.de/3yrs> [5 Jan 2026].
- 15 tagesschau.de 2024, n. 10.
- 16 Ibid.

– translated from German –