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This article investigates the December 2024 South Korean martial law crisis to elucidate how far-right forces weaponize historical revisionism to construct a "crisis narrative". Against South Korea's democratization, the far-right intellectual "New Right" movement emerged to counter liberal and progressive paradigms by justifying past authoritarian dictatorships and framing the liberalization of society as an existential threat to the nation. Through a discourse analysis of primary sources, specifically far-right historical writings, publications, and manifestos, this study demonstrates how this historical revisionism operates not merely as a distortion of historical facts, but as a political project fabricating an illusion of impending national ruin. This narrative systematically stigmatizes democratic institutions and civil society as internal enemies, instigating a de facto civil war mindset, which perceives liberal parties, labor unions, feminists, LGBTQ+, people with disabilities, immigrants, and refugees, etc. as enemies threatening the nation, thereby justifying violence against them. Furthermore, by examining primary sources directly related to the 2024 crisis, including President Yoon Suk-yeol's martial law decrees, public addresses, and extreme-right agitators' speeches, this article reveals how this exact crisis narrative actively functioned to legitimize the unconstitutional suspension of the rule of law and incite violent riots.
Keywords: far right; historical revisionism; crisis narrative; 2024 South Korean martial law crisis.

Transformando a história numa narrativa de crise – sobre o revisionismo histórico da extrema-direita na Coreia do Sul

Este artigo investiga a crise provocada pela imposição da lei marcial na Coreia do Sul em dezembro de 2024 para elucidar as formas como as forças de extrema-direita usam o revisionismo histórico como arma para construir uma "narrativa de crise". Em contraposição à democratização da Coreia do Sul, o movimento intelectual de extrema-direita "Nova Direita" emergiu para combater paradigmas liberais e progressistas, justificando as ditaduras do passado e enquadrando a liberalização da so-

ciedade como uma ameaça existencial à nação. Através de uma análise de discurso de fontes primárias, especificamente discursos historiográficos, publicações e manifestos de extrema-direita, este estudo demonstra como esse revisionismo histórico opera não apenas como uma mera distorção dos factos históricos, mas também como um projeto político que fabrica a ilusão de uma ruína nacional iminente. Esta narrativa estigmatiza sistematicamente as instituições democráticas e a sociedade civil como inimigos internos, instigando uma mentalidade de guerra civil de facto, que entende partidos liberais, sindicatos, feministas, a comunidade LGBTQ+, pessoas com deficiência, imigrantes, refugiados, etc., como inimigos que ameaçam a nação, justificando assim a violência contra estes. Além disso, ao examinar fontes primárias diretamente relacionadas com a crise de 2024, incluindo os decretos de lei marcial do Presidente Yoon Suk-yeol, pronunciamentos públicos e discursos de agitadores de extrema-direita, este artigo revela o modo como essa exata narrativa de crise funcionou ativamente para legitimar a suspensão inconstitucional do Estado de direito e incitar revoltas violentas.
Palavras-chave: extrema-direita; revisionismo histórico; narrativa de crise; crise da lei marcial sul-coreana de 2024.

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Kwangmin Pyo*

1. Theme and Methodology

At 23:00 on December 3, 2024, martial law was abruptly declared in Seoul, South Korea—a nation hitherto recognized as a stable, consolidated democracy. The martial law was issued in the absence of any exigencies; there were no North Korean incursions, no terrorist attacks, and no other symptoms of disorder, such as civil war, civil unrest, or riot. South Korea was not in a state that necessitated an extraordinary suspension of the legal order. The then-President, Yoon Suk-yeol, deployed specialized military units and police apparatuses through this illegal martial decree, aiming to seize and neutralize the National Assembly. However, spearheaded by opposition lawmakers, the legislature successfully rescinded the decree within two and a half hours. Ten days thereafter, the National Assembly passed an impeachment motion against Yoon; the threat to democracy posed by the exec-

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utive appeared to have reached a conclusion. Yet, grave developments continued to unfold: the mobilization of far-right forces dedicated to shielding the impeached President and subverting the legislative body. Tens of thousands gathered weekly in Seoul and other major cities, condemning the impeachment, vilifying the opposition, and demanding the restoration of the executive. In the early hours of January 19, 2025, approximately 300 pro-Yoon partisans stormed a local district court, culminating in a violent riot and assaults on law enforcement officers. In a country with a successfully established democracy, we were forced to witness this violent surge of far-right forces.

Through the case of South Korea, this article contends that far-right historical revisionism goes beyond the mere distortion of individual historical facts, attempting instead to instigate a *de facto* civil war through the formation of a "crisis narrative." The re-election of Donald Trump and the ascendancy of far-right factions in Europe made evident the global resurgence of far-right politics. In the South Korean context, the peril posed by far-right actors has historically been perceived as marginal, owing to the inability of these forces to secure a stable foothold within institutionalized party systems. Nevertheless, the exigencies following President Yoon Suk-yeol's martial law declaration on December 3, 2024 attest to the necessity of acknowledging the critical threat posed by far-right actors in South Korea. While South Korea has often been viewed as a benchmark for democratic consolidation, successfully navigating the transition from economic development to political democratization, the violent eruptions of far-right activities reveal the instability of the democratic transition. Accordingly, this article seeks to fundamentally elucidate these violent activities, which have emerged as a profound threat to South Korean democracy, by interrogating them through the crisis narrative based on the far-right's historical revisionism.

The task of clearly defining the political entity of the "far-right" remains a highly contentious challenge due to its conceptual indeterminacy.[1] The meanings and specific behaviors embodied by the far-right

1 Not only is there an absence of a general definition for the far right, but the very terminology

manifest in vastly different ways depending on the historical context and social conditions of each country. Therefore, this study does not undertake the grand discursive task of universally defining the identity of global far-right forces. Rather, the analytical scope of this research is confined to examining how far-right actors instrumentalize history to form a specific crisis narrative, thereby justifying the escalation of extreme political polarization into a *de facto* civil war. Despite such diverse characteristics and aspects manifested across different countries and contexts, global far-right forces generally exhibit a distinct tendency to rely entirely on historical revisionism to present their own alternative historical narratives.[2] While the specific historical periods and events targeted by far-right factions in various countries are highly diverse, the underlying structural logic remains remarkably consistent. It functions as an instrument of anti-pluralism, aiming to deprive minorities of their rights, enforce an oppressive cultural homogeneity, and ultimately erode the democratic order based on pluralism. For South Korean far-right forces as well, historical revisionism serves as a crucial source of legitimacy, through which they perceive themselves as the sole guardians of national identity.

To empirically elucidate how historical revisionism confers legitimacy upon far-right measures, this research adopts a discourse analysis methodology based on concrete primary sources, such as writings and speeches. Through this approach, it examines how South Korean far-right actors established a crisis narrative via historical revisionism. This article is grounded in the perspective that the historical revision-

is also being interchangeably used in diverse ways. For example, in the German-speaking world, terms such as right-wing radicalism (*Rechtsradikalismus*), right-wing fundamentalism (*Rechtsfundamentalismus*), neo-Nazism (*Neo-Nazismus*), neo-Fascism (*Neo-Faschismus*), right-wing and national populism (*Rechts- und Nationalpopulismus*), and national conservatism (*Nationalkonservatismus*) are being utilized as terms to designate far-right forces. In this paper, the common term 'far-right' is used to refer to them. Cf. Wolfgang Kowalsky and Wolfgang Schroeder, "Rechtsextremismus – Begriff, Methode, Analyse," in *Rechtsextremismus. Einfuhrung und Forschungsbilanz*, ed. Wolfgang Kowalsky and Wolfgang Schroeder (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1994), 9.

2 Louie Dean Valencia-García, "Far-Right Revisionism and the End of History," in *Far-Right Revisionism and the End of History: Alt/Histories*, ed. Louie Dean Valencia-García (New York: Routledge, 2021), 7-9.

ism of South Korean far-right forces goes beyond the mere distortion or manipulation of individual historical facts, constituting instead a powerful crisis narrative. As Paul Ricoeur posited that memories of the past are "incorporated into the formation of identity"[3] through the medium of narrative, the historical narratives of the far-right function as a political evaluation of the past, molding the identity of specific groups. The core driving force propelling the crisis narrative they have constructed follows the logic of the "state of exception (*Ausnahmezustand*)." For Schmitt, the state of exception signifies an "extreme state of emergency" and a situation "endangering the existence of the state," upon which the very survival of the nation hinges.[4] This article adopts the view that historical revisionism utilizes this concept of the state of exception to construct a crisis narrative wherein the state is threatened by internal and external enemies. Methodologically, therefore, this study employs a bipartite approach. First, it analyzes historical revisionist primary sources to examine how they construct a crisis narrative, deriving the macro-structure of far-right cognition through micro-textual analysis. Utilizing this narrative as an analytical lens, it then investigates primary sources documenting the martial law crisis to elucidate its inherent violent realities. Ultimately, this empirically reveals how weaponized historical memories and exclusionary politics subvert the constitutional order.

2. Literature Review: Historical Revisionism of the Far Right

As the ascendancy of far-right parties in contemporary global politics has become increasingly pronounced, scholarly inquiry into far-right formations has proliferated; accordingly, diverse analyses regarding the perception, distortion, and instrumentalization of history by far-right forces have been put forward. Research on far-right historical discourses has primarily been concerned with the critique of the denial

3 Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 84-85.

4 Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie: Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2009), 13-14.

and distortion of historical facts concerning World War II – specifically, so-called "Holocaust denial."[5] Most far-right parties established in post-war Europe maintained direct or indirect lineages with the fascist regimes of the early twentieth century, and their constituencies were similarly characterized by a nostalgic yearning for the totalitarian regimes. Consequently, their historical revisionism manifested as an apologia for Nazi Germany and fascism, as well as the negation of war crimes such as the genocide of Jews; their primary strategy involved an attempt to reinterpret historical records by enumerating counter-examples. Accordingly, research regarding far-right historical discourse has predominantly focused on elucidating historical facts and truths through empirical source materials or re-establishing a critical historical discourse against totalitarianism.[6]

As the strategies of far-right forces subsequently shifted from direct historical negation toward appealing to the ethno-national sentiments of the masses, research on far-right historical revisionism has increasingly focused on the *weaponization of history*. This phenomenon is understood as both a political strategy and a method of mass mobilization designed to garner public support. Notably, Ruth Wodak, who developed the "Discourse-Historical Approach" for analyzing far-right parties, demonstrated through the analysis of their speeches that these groups claim to defend a homogeneous national identity and a (non-existent) mythical homeland.[7] Furthermore, studies examining the memory politics of the far-right critique their strategy of downplaying the oppressive elements of past fascist or imperialist eras while selectively

5 Roger Eatwell, "Holocaust Denial: A Study in Propaganda Technique," in *Neo-Fascism in Europe*, ed. Luciano Cheles, Ronnie Ferguson and Michalina Vaughan (London: Longman, 1991); Deborah E. Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (New York: The Free Press, 1993).

6 Richard J. Evans, *Lying About Hitler: History, Holocaust, and the David Irving Trial* (New York: Basic Books, 2002); Robert Jan van Pelt, *The Case for Auschwitz: Evidence from the Irving Trial* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).

7 Martin Reisigl and Ruth Wodak, *Discourse and Discrimination: Rhetorics of Racism and Antisemitism* (London: Routledge, 2001); Martin Reisigl and Ruth Wodak, "The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA)," in *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, ed. Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer (London: Sage, 2009); Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean* (London: Sage, 2015).

highlighting administrative achievements, such as the maintenance of public order.[8] Additionally, other research has critically explored how the far right establishes an exclusive national identity through historical distortion—a political strategy utilized to frame themselves as the true inheritors of the nation's traditional values and national identity.[9]

Due to the distinct historical context of its formation, the historical revisionism of the South Korean far-right diverges from its Western counterparts, which primarily focus on discourses of racism and imperialism. Studies examining far-right historical revisionism in South Korea tend to focus on its role as a core mechanism that triggers the so-called "history wars," thereby severely exacerbating the ideological polarization of South Korean politics.[10] Consequently, South Korean scholarship generally characterizes the far right's historical revisionism not merely as a matter of academic divergence in interpreting the past, but rather as a deliberate political project aimed at acquiring power and securing political hegemony. Exemplifying this perspective are studies that trace the origins of far-right historical revisionism to the "New Right" movement. Emerging in the early 2000s, this movement represented an attempt to construct a new ideological foundation for political victory amidst the conservative bloc's successive electoral defeats and mounting sense of political crisis.[11] Recent empirical studies have further demonstrated that historical revisionism functions as a

8 Stefan Couperus and Pier Domenico Tortola, "Right-wing populism's (ab)use of the past in Italy and the Netherlands," *Debats. Revista de Cultura, Poder i Societat* 4, n.º 2 (2019): 105–118, https://doi.org/10.28939/iam.debats-en.2019-9.

9 Hans-Georg Betz and Carol Johnson, "Against the Current – Stemming the Tide: The Nostalgic Ideology of the Contemporary Radical Populist Right," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 9, n.º 3 (2004): 311–327, https://doi.org/10.1080/1356931042000263546; Stefan Couperus, Pier Domenico Tortola and Lars Rensmann, "Memory Politics of the Far Right in Europe," *European Politics and Society* 24, n.º 4 (2023): 435–444, https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2022.2058757.

10 Jeongin Kim, *The History Wars: The Battle to Interpret the Past* [in Korean] (Chaegsesang, 2016); Seuk-ryule Hong, "Rethinking History Wars in South Korea" [in Korean], *Critical Review of History* 128 (2019): 302–325, http://dx.doi.org/10.38080/crh.2019.08.128.302.

11 Hyug Baeg Im, "Korea's New Right: Background and Prospects" [in Korean], *Kwanhoon Journal* 93 (2004): 157–169; Jaeho Jeon, "A Study on the Ideological Character of Korean Conservatism in the 2000s: With a Focus on the New Right" [in Korean], *Journal of Contemporary Politics* 7, n.º 1 (2014): 165–193; Ji Yun Lee, "Changes in Korean Conservatism since the 2000s: Focusing on the Historical Narrative of Edmund Burke and Korean New Right" [in Korean], *The Korean Review of Political Thought* 25, n.º 1 (2019): 95–124, http://dx.doi.org/10.37248/krpt.2019.05.25.1.95.

potent mechanism for political mobilization, capable of inciting the masses and precipitating far-right collective action.[12] Furthermore, it has also been noted that the vanguard of this political project is occupied by right-wing intellectuals—including conservative academics and journalists.[13]

While previous studies have largely confined their focus to how far-right forces utilize historical revisionism as a mere expansionary strategy, this article delves deeper into the crisis narrative constructed by such revisionism. In other words, it is this crisis narrative that breathes life into far-right historical revisionism, endowing it with the political efficacy required to actively mobilize the masses. Furthermore, this research analyzes the South Korean far-right as an empirical case study to demonstrate how this crisis narrative is utilized to justify violent mobilization. The far-right strategy of garnering public support by disseminating the perception that the homeland is imperiled by internal and external threats has been widely discussed through the lens of Carl Schmitt's concept of the state of exception.[14] Drawing on these studies, the current article argues that far-right forces have adopted the proliferation of a crisis narrative—provided by historical revisionism—as the primary conduit for spreading the perception that the nation is in a state of exception and under existential threat.

12 In-Jeong Hwang, "Support Bases of the Far-Right in South Korea and Their Political Implications" [in Korean], *The Journal of Political Science & Communication* 27, n.º 2 (2024): 127–162, http://dx.doi.org/10.15617/psc.2024.6.30.2.127; Myunghee Lee, "Protectors of Liberal Democracy or Defenders of Past Authoritarianism?: Authoritarian Legacies, Collective Identity, and the Far-right Protest in South Korea," *Democratization* 31, n.º 3 (2024): 638–658, https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2023.2301330.

13 Myungji Yang, "The Specter of the Past: Reconstructing Conservative Historical Memory in South Korea," *Politics & Society* 49, n.º 3 (2021): 337–362, https://doi.org/10.1177/00323292211033082; Myungji Yang, "Camouflaged Extremism: Authoritarian Legacies and the Far Right in South Korea," *Critical Asian Studies* 57, n.º 3 (2025): 392–412, https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2025.2525507.

14 Salomi Boukala, "Far-right Discourse as Legitimacy? Analysing Political Rhetoric on the "Migration Issue" in Greece," *Studies in Communication Sciences* 21, n.º 2 (2021): 1–13, https://doi.org/10.24434/j.scoms.2021.02.014; Valur Ingimundarson and Sveinn Jóhannesson (eds.), *Liberal Disorder, States of Exception, and Populist Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021); Oliver Schmidtke, "The 'Will of the People': The Populist Challenge to Democracy in the Name of Popular Sovereignty," *Social & Legal Studies* 32, n.º 6 (2023): 911–929, https://doi.org/10.1177/09646639231153124; Roberta A. Adams, *Trumpism, Carl Schmitt and the Threat of Anti-liberalism in the United States: The Political Thought of Donald Trump and Trumpism* (Lanham and London: Lexington Books, 2024).

3. Path to Democratization in South Korea: A Historical Sketch

Since an understanding of South Korean politics is essential for grasping the origins and structure of far-right historical revisionism, this article first provides an overview of the trajectory of modern South Korean contemporary politics. The ruling regimes and major political events since the foundation of the Republic are as follows:

< South Korean Presidents and Administrations >

Year	President	Ruling Party	Regime Attribute
1948 - 1960	Syngman Rhee	Liberal Party	Authoritarian
1960	April 19 Revolution		
1960 - 1961 (Parliamentary System)	John Myeon Jang (Prime Minister)	Democratic Party	Liberal
1961	May 16th Coup d'État		
1963 - 1979	Park Chung-hee	Democratic Republican Party	Authoritarian
1980 - 1988	Chun Doo-hwan	Democratic Justice Party	Authoritarian
1987	June Democracy Movement		
1988 - 1993	Roh Tae-woo	Democratic Liberal Party	Conservative
1993 - 1998	Kim Young-sam	Democratic Liberal Party → New Korea Party	Conservative
1998 - 2003	Kim Dae-jung	National Congress for New Politics → Millennium Democratic Party	Liberal
2003 - 2008	Roh Moo-hyun	Millennium Democratic Party → Open Our Party	Liberal
2008 - 2013	Lee Myung-bak	Grand National Party → Saenuri Party	Conservative
2013 - 2017	Park Geun-hye	Saenuri Party	Conservative
2017	Impeachment of President Park Geun-hye		
2017 - 2022	Moon Jae-in	Democratic Party of Korea	Liberal

2022 - 2025	Yoon Suk-yeol	People Power Party	Conservative
2025	Impeachment of President Yoon Suk-yeol		
2025 -	Lee Jae-myung	Democratic Party of Korea	Liberal

South Korea's modern political history was forged through a turbulent process of colonial subjugation, war, and ensuing long-term dictatorships. Although independent political systems had persisted on the Korean Peninsula for about five millennia, the Joseon Dynasty, the final kingdom, failed in its modernization and was relegated to a colony by Japan in 1910. With Japan's defeat in the Pacific War in 1945, the peninsula achieved independence, yet it was immediately bifurcated into North and South due to the onset of the Cold War. Within the global Cold War confrontation, the division between North and South precipitated the Korean War in 1950; this large-scale conflict, a crystallization of Cold War hostilities, did not merely devastate the peninsula during its three-year duration but also functioned to legitimize the subsequent dictatorial regimes. The horrific experience of the war inscribed an existential dread and a potent "Red Complex"[15] within South Korean society.[16] Syngman Rhee and his inner circle of former pro-Japanese collaborators defined communism as an "absolute evil," purging his political adversaries by labeling them as "pro-communist" and establishing an authoritarian system by suppressing civic resistance.

Although the Rhee government was ousted by a civil revolution in 1960, a year later in 1961, military personnel led by Park Chung-hee staged a coup d'état under the banner of anti-communism to establish a military dictatorial regime. Following Park Chung-hee's assassination in 1979, the military regime of Chun Doo-hwan, which emerged through another coup, similarly foregrounded anti-communism to stigmatize democratic demands as anti-state activities, thoroughly crushing the

15 South Korean expression for the extreme fear and disgust of communism.

16 Dong-choon Kim, *War and Society – What Did the Korean War Mean to Us?* [in Korean] (Seoul: Dolbegae, 2006), 74–75.

fundamental rights of citizens. Thus, South Korean authoritarian governments branded those critical of the administration as communists or leftists intent on destroying society, persecuting them in the name of national security and liberal democracy.[17] Anti-communism became a substantive norm of dominance that presided over the constitution, serving as a powerful justification for dictatorship and human rights violations. Under the pretext of protecting the state from North Korean threats, authoritarian regimes suppressed fundamental democratic rights. Anti-communism, over decades, thus established the fundamental ontological foundation of South Korean politics.

South Korea's democratization established a macro-narrative of instituting democracy through civic resistance, thereby overcoming the anti-communist dictatorship. The trajectory of South Korean democratization stands as one of the most dynamic manifestations of Samuel Huntington's third wave of democratization. As Huntington posited, the emergence of a middle class facilitated by economic development catalyzed escalating demands for democracy, culminating in a process of gradual democratization mediated by compromise between pro-democracy contingencies and the military dictatorial apparatus.[18] Consequently, the 1987 constitutional revision and the inauguration of direct presidential elections propelled the democratic advance, and in the 1992 presidential election, Kim Young-sam, a civilian, not from the military, was elected president. In 1997, with the election of Kim Dae-jung—a long-time leader of the pro-democracy movement—as president, the culture of military dictatorship weakened throughout society, and democratic lifestyles began to spread. This democratization process enabled a reinterpretation of modern Korean politics as a realization of democracy authored by the citizenry. The democratization process is concentrated and articulated within the Preamble of the Constitution, which was revised in 1987 following mass civic demonstrations:

17 Namhee Lee, *The Making of Minjung: Democracy and the Politics of Representation in South Korea* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 82.

18 Samuel P. Huntington, "Democracy's Third Wave," *The Journal of Democracy* 2, n.º 2 (1991): 33–34.

> We, the people of Korea ... upholding the cause of the Provisional Republic of Korea Government born of the March 1st Independence Movement of 1919 and the democratic ideals of the April 19th Uprising of 1960 against injustice...[19]

The March 1st Movement of 1919, a mass mobilization for independence from colonial rule, holds profound significance as the first modern civic movement wherein Koreans declared themselves the sovereigns of the nation. The "democratic ideals of the April 19th Uprising" signifies the spirit of the revolution that terminated the Syngman Rhee dictatorship through civic resistance; notably, this constitution recognizes a right of resistance in the Lockean sense. Ultimately, this Preamble situates South Korea's national identity within a genealogy of resistance against imperialism and the struggle against dictatorship, grounding the post-1987 political order in a historical narrative wherein citizens, as sovereign agents, founded the state and have continuously propelled the development of democracy.

The democratic narrative inaugurated the problematic of transitional justice—the rectification of past transgressions during the authoritarian regimes. The South Korean democratic narrative officially validated the constitutive significance of civic resistance movements, encompassing not only the March 1st Movement and the April 19th Revolution enshrined in the Constitution but also the Jeju 4.3 Incident (1947–1948) and the 1980 Gwangju Uprising, as pivotal junctures in democratization. Concurrently, this narrative problematized the authoritarian regimes, which had subjugated the citizenry under the pretext of anti-communism, positioning them as a structural impediment to democratization. Such a perception led to transitional justice for liquidating the legacies of the former dictatorship through legal and political procedures. The first civilian government, led by Kim Young-sam, promoted a "Correcting History" policy that facilitated the dismantling

19 "Constitution of the Republic of Korea," Korea Legislation Research Institute, accessed May 21, 2026, https://elaw.klri.re.kr/kor_service/lawView.do?hseq=1&lang=KOR.

of colonial vestiges and the eradication of *Hanahoe*, the clandestine military faction responsible for previous coups; furthermore, by enacting special legislation regarding the Gwangju Democratization Movement, it effectuated the legal prosecution of the two former presidents, Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo, who had seized power through coup d'état. His successor, Kim Dae-jung, the preeminent pro-democracy leader often hailed as "South Korea's Mandela", established an institution to interrogate human rights violations of the dictatorial era and inaugurated the *National Human Rights Commission* to erode authoritarian legacies and advance the human rights paradigm. The subsequent Roh Moo-hyun administration further entrenched the transitional justice policy by establishing the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* in 2005, which investigated civilian massacres spanning from the Japanese colonial era through the Korean War, as well as the fabrication of espionage charges and human rights transgressions perpetrated by the authoritarian regimes.[20] These policies of transitional justice served as a mechanism for unmasking the realities of sovereign violence obscured beneath the anti-communist state apparatus. By subverting the legitimacy of the dictatorial system predicated on anti-communism, these policies functioned as a project of dismantling the very foundation of the authoritarian anti-communist state.

However, the legacy of the authoritarian regime—which persisted for roughly four decades from the foundation of the Republic of Korea in 1948 to the democratization in 1987—has imprinted a profound path dependency on the South Korean political landscape. Anti-communism and the state-led developmental dictatorship forged during this era functioned as the core ideologies defining South Korean society. More-

20 For specific details on South Korea's policies for reckoning with the past, refer to the following works. Jong-Chul Ahn, "Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations' human rights and past history settlement policies" [in Korean], *Naeil-eul yeoneun yeogsa* 37 (2009): 39–59; Byung-ook Ahn, "The present conditions and tasks of past settlement in Korea" [in Korean], *Critical Review of History* 93 (2010): 32–60. Chan-Ho Eom, "Settlement of Past History and Healing of History" [in Korean], *Studies in Humanities* 33 (2012): 263–290; Thomas Cornelis Adriaenssens, "'Settling the Past' in South Korea: The Legacy of Authoritarianism, Compensation Law, and a Hierarchy of Victimhood," *Korea Legislation Research Institute Journal of Law and Legislation* 14, n.º 1 (2024): 191–243.

over, the democratization catalyzed by civil society's resistance in 1987 did not entail the complete collapse of the old regime or a revolutionary upheaval; rather, it was a transition achieved through compromise between the old authoritarian elite and the pro-democracy forces. This "pacted" democratization provided the authoritarian forces with an institutional space for survival, allowing them to evade political purges and persist as legitimate political parties. Under these circumstances, the former authoritarian forces did not remain a monolithic bloc in the post-democratization era, but rather fragmented across a diverse political spectrum. Mainstream conservatives partially acknowledged the historical errors of the past authoritarian regime and embraced procedural democracy as the new rules of the game. By distancing themselves both ideologically and organizationally from the far right, they transformed into moderate conservatives championing the free-market economy and the ROK-U.S. alliance. Consequently, they successfully secured power by winning voter mandates within the democratic electoral framework. Although these conservative forces originated as the successors of the military dictatorship, they acquired democratic legitimacy as institutional parties by recurrently winning the presidency through democratic procedures. As the mainstream conservatives achieved success within the institutional establishment, certain extremist factions that rejected democratic pluralism and clung to past ideologies were marginalized into minor splinter groups within the conservative bloc, ultimately consolidating into the contemporary far-right forces.

4. Crisis Narrative of South Korean Far-Right Historical Revisionism

It was amidst this historical transition, characterized by democratization and the fragmentation of conservative forces, that far-right historical revisionism emerged. Certain factions of the conservative right perceived the proliferation of the democratic historical narrative as an existential crisis of the state; some radical conservative actors identified the liberal forces exercising socio-political hegemony as 'enemies' who must be removed for the sake of national security. In the 2000s,

conservative right-wing intellectuals formed the New Right movement, contending that the democratization process had precipitated a crisis of national identity.[21] They established far-right publishing houses, inaugurated new academic journals, and engineered networks with civic organizations to fortify their ideological position. Through these maneuvers, they introduced a retrogressive historical perspective that repudiated the democratic narrative of contemporary history. The New Right perceives South Korean society as existing in a state of perpetual civil war against communist forces; within this imaginary, they delineate not only external North Korea but also internal actors—the Democratic Party (liberals), labor unions, leftist intellectuals, journalists, etc.—as "enemies" to be eradicated. Thus, maintaining an unyielding anti-communist posture even after democratization, they endeavored to inject citizens with the fear of North Korea, communism, and potential war, claiming that the left might subvert the liberal democratic order of South Korea.[22] The New Right concentrated their critique on the historical field to stigmatize democratization as an existential threat to national identity, thereby constructing the bedrock for subsequent far-right historical revisionism. This assault on the democratic historical narrative intensified during the successive conservative administrations of Lee Myung-bak (2008) and Park Geun-hye (2013), precipitating what has been termed the history wars, which exacerbated the ideological polarization of South Korean politics.[23]

The New Right's offensive strategy against democratization focused on heightening a sense of crisis, propagating the narrative that "the nation is heading in the wrong direction." While emphasizing that past dictatorial regimes contributed to South Korea's development by

21 Haegu Chŏng, "A Critical Evaluation of New Right's Perceptions of the Realities" [in Korean], *Critical Review of History* 76 (2006): 219–220; Sungik Yang, "An Old Right in New Bottles: State without Nation in South Korean New Right Historiography," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 80, n.º 4 (2021): 897–898, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911821001443.

22 Myungji Yang, "Camouflaged Extremism," 398–399.

23 Kim, *The History Wars*, 17–19; Hong, "Rethinking History Wars in South Korea," 302–303; Jeongin Kim, "History as a Political Weapon, and Five Phases of the So-called "History War"" [in Korean], *The Paek-San Hakpo*, 117 (2020): 13–18, http://dx.doi.org/10.52557/tpsh.2020.117.5; Jong-Pil Yoon, "Recent history wars in South Korea," *Paedagogica Historica* 56, n.º 4 (2020): 562–563, https://doi.org/10.1080/00309230.2019.1590425.

achieving the milestones of state-building and economic growth, the New Right advanced the logic that the democratization process itself was driving the nation into a crisis. The crystallization of this crisis narrative into a popular political slogan produced the term "Lost Decade." Originally coined in Japan to denote prolonged economic stagnation, this expression was thoroughly repurposed into a political framework upon its introduction to South Korea. The then-opposition Grand National Party (GNP) and the conservative media stigmatized the decade of Democratic Party's rule from 1998 to 2008—spanning the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations—as a 'failed decade.' In doing so, they propagated the perception that these liberal governments had mismanaged state affairs, thereby plunging the nation into a comprehensive crisis.

The following column, authored in 2007 by a far-right journalist, explicitly demonstrates this perspective, which disparages the post-democratization political landscape as a state of crisis:

> ... For South Korea as well, the past ten years have been a lost era. ... Passing through the Kim Dae-jung era, which was marred by excessive handouts to North Korea and rampant power corruption, and the Roh Moo-hyun era, which squandered four years on balance and equality while turning a blind eye to growth, every sector of our society has remained at a standstill. The brunt of this damage was borne by the socially vulnerable, including powerless ordinary citizens and recent graduates. Meanwhile, the very cliques who pay lip service to reform and innovation are busy throwing exclusive banquets for themselves. ... China is in hot pursuit, and Japan has reignited its engine. How will we survive sandwiched between nations that are several times larger than South Korea? We must turn the tide of this lost decade. Just as a person cannot grow taller if they miss their crucial growth spurt, the same holds true for a nation. The next ten years represent South Korea's final oppor-

> tunity. If we squander this time, we will inevitably be relegated to a third-rate nation...[24]

Armed with this political framing, the conservative party achieved an unprecedented streak of electoral victories, beginning with the 4th Local Elections in 2006 and extending through the 17th Presidential Election in 2007 and the 18th General Election in 2008. They successfully recaptured power by securing an overwhelming margin in vote share against the incumbent Democratic Party.

Alongside their critique of the Democratic Party's tenure, New Right intellectuals devoted themselves to a full-scale historical revisionist project aimed at justifying the former dictatorial system. The dictatorship of President Syngman Rhee, which was toppled by the democratic revolution in 1960, was rationalized as an unavoidable choice in the process of defending the state against communist threats. Under the banner of anti-communism, Rhee severely abused state violence throughout his presidency by executing not only communists but also his political opponents. *A New Understanding of Pre- and Post-Liberation History* (2006), published by New Right intellectuals, justified such civilian massacres and human rights violations as inevitable measures for state-building, as follows:

> ... Syngman Rhee certainly engaged in dictatorship and corruption. Events like the National Defense Corps Incident [25] are inexcusable. I am not trying to deny that, and I think we can simply leave that particular yardstick as it is. However, there are many other important yardsticks as well. My point is that we should acknowledge these other yardsticks and adopt a broad-

24 Chang-geuk Moon, "The Lost 10 Years" [in Korean], *JoongAng Ilbo*, May 28, 2007, https://www.joongang.co.kr/article/2742063. The author was nominated for prime minister by President Park Geun-hye in 2014, but withdrew his nomination following public controversy over his historical revisionist views.

25 Amidst the Korean War (December 1950 - February 1951), an estimated 50,000 to 120,000 conscripts succumbed to malnutrition and frostbite as a direct consequence of systemic corruption.

> er perspective. ... I hope we can examine various factors from a broad, comparative historical perspective: how other places around the world striving to build a nation at that time went about it, how other countries that underwent war dealt with it, and just how inherently violent the very process of nation-building really is. ...[26]

The argument that the state violence perpetrated by the Syngman Rhee administration should be condoned—given that such violence inherently operates during the nation-building process—and that Rhee's monumental contribution to founding the republic must be acknowledged, constitutes one of the New Right's core strategies for justifying dictatorship. Likewise, another dictator, Park Chung-hee, is considered the "father of modernization" who spearheaded industrialization. In *The Origins and Future of Korean Democracy: Conservatives Lead the Way* (2011), published by other New Right intellectuals, the following logic is presented:

> ... This study pointed out that for a considerable period following the foundation of the state, the conservative industrialization forces maintained an authoritarian regime that suppressed human rights and opposition forces. At the same time, however, it also emphasized that these conservative industrialization forces, acting as the leading actors of state affairs, successfully established the republic and cultivated South Korea into a community with a distinct identity. Furthermore, through the fortification of the national security system and the successful execution of an industrial revolution, they laid the indispensable

26 Jihyang Park, Cheol Kim, Ilyoung Kim and Younghoon Yi, "Dialogue: New Horizons in Pre- and Post-Liberation History" [in Korean], in *A New Understanding of Pre- and Post-Liberation History*, vol. 2, ed. Jihyang Park, Cheol Kim, Ilyoung Kim and Younghoon Yi (Chaeksesang, 2006), 673–674.

> foundation and framework necessary for South Korea to develop into a mature modern nation-state. ... [27]

Thus, far-right historical revisionism asserts that the Republic of Korea was founded upon the leader's grand decision to rescue the nation rather than upon civic resistance, thereby validating the power abuse of authoritarian regimes as an inevitable and legitimate ruling act for the foundation and defense of the state. Through these maneuvers, they repudiate the democratic consensus, human rights paradigms, and pluralistic principles, seeking a regression toward an authoritarian state anchored in anti-communism.

The New Right's ideological framework for legitimizing past dictatorships does not remain confined to the past; rather, it extends into a contemporary crisis narrative positing that the existential survival of South Korea is menaced by adversaries both internal and external to the system. A quintessential text that explicitly illustrates this ideological baseline is *Liberal Democracy in South Korea and Its Enemies* (2018), co-authored by Jai-bong Ro (former Prime Minister under a conservative administration) and other far-right intellectuals. The core logic permeating this volume rests on a radical dichotomy: the premise that South Korean liberal democracy is threatened not merely by external forces but faces a perpetual threat of subversion by insidious elements operating clandestinely within the nation's constitutional order to overthrow the system. The volume also includes the 2017 founding manifesto of the "Korea Freedom Congress," a New Right organization established by the co-authors, the main tenets of which are as follows:

> Based on the historical judgment that South Korea's endeavor to secure modernity began with the political revolution of state-building, advanced through the industrial revolution of

27 Sae-jung Kim, "Conflict and Interdependence in Nation-building, Industrialization, and Democratization: Toward a Unified Historical Perception" [in Korean], in *The Origins and Future of Korean Democracy: Conservatives Lead the Way*, ed. Byeong-jik An (Sidaejeongsin, 2011), 133.

> modernization, and will ultimately be consummated through unification under liberal democracy, we hereby declare as follows:
>
> 1, As responsible intellectuals accountable to the South Korean people, we declare that we will devote all our passion and effort to advancing and fortifying the ideology of liberal democracy. We stand resolutely against the totalitarian subversive forces that – by adhering to the North Korean regime's strategy—seek to destroy our national legitimacy by misleading the political consciousness of the public through propaganda and agitation built on falsehoods.
>
> ...
>
> 6. We once again reaffirm that the liberal democratic system protects freedom by institutionalizing the ideal of national sovereignty – a process grounded in competition based on the principle of constitutional legitimacy and the representative system derived from it. Furthermore, we resolutely condemn the vulgar mindset and actions of the entire political establishment. Bereft of the civic literacy necessary to understand this foundation, the political class has abdicated its representative function; by pandering to mass political rallies orchestrated by anti-Republic of Korea forces, it is now, consciously or unconsciously, colluding in a conspiracy to subvert the system.[28]

Building upon this crisis narrative, the New Right labels critical civil society and the broader progressive bloc as 'enemies' of liberal democracy. Even prior to the 2024 martial law crisis, the far-right and New Right camps had consistently stigmatized the pan-liberal and progressive coalition—encompassing liberal parties, labor unions, civic activists, and feminists—as 'anti-state forces' or 'enemies' that repudiate the legitimacy of the state. Rather than acknowledging their political adversaries

28 Jai-bong Ro, "Declaration of the Korea Freedom Congress" [in Korean], in *Liberal Democracy in South Korea and Its Enemies*, ed. Jai-bong Ro (Book and People, 2018), 19–21.

as partners in governance or a legitimate opposition, they have framed them as a malicious faction intent on destroying the nation.

The historical revisionism and crisis narratives of the New Right, which had been taking shape since the mid-2000s, began to gain mass traction in the mid-2010s. Specifically, the catalyst for the mass proliferation of far-right historical revisionism was the mobilization against the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye (2016–2017). Weekly demonstrations involving hundreds of thousands of conservative citizens, primarily the elderly, occurred in the heart of Seoul for nearly six months to voice their opposition to the impeachment.[29] Following Park's impeachment in 2017 and the subsequent establishment of another Democratic Party administration with the election of President Moon Jae-in, two former conservative presidents, Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye, were successively imprisoned. The political downfall of these two leaders instilled an unprecedented, profound sense of existential crisis across the entire South Korean conservative bloc. This sense of political defeat, coupled with the rapid social changes spearheaded by the liberal administration at the time, further amplified the anxiety and alienation of the conservative public.[30] The liberal government and civil society promoted policies enhancing multicultural values, such as gender equality, alongside the acceptance of refugees and immigrants, and the protection of LGBTQ+ rights, and these policies provoked a strong backlash from young men.[31] For the conservative public, accus-

29 These demonstrations were referred to as "Taegeukgi rallies" (*Taegeukgi Jiphoe*), so named because participants attended while carrying the *Taegeukgi*, the national flag of South Korea. Cf. JangSoo Chae, "The Ideology of 'Taegeukgi Rally'" [in Korean], *Marxism* 15, n.º 4 (2018): 109–111, https://doi.org/10.26587/marx.15.4.201811.005; Hyunchool Lee, "Silver Generation's Counter-Movement in the Information Age: Korea's Pro-Park Rallies," *Korea Observer* 49, n.º 3 (2018): 469–471, https://doi.org/10.29152/KOIKS.2018.49.3.465; Gil-Soo Han, "Nostalgic Nationalists in South Korea: The Flag-Carriers' Struggles," in *Calculated Nationalism in Contemporary South Korea: Movements for Political and Economic Democratization in the 21st Century*, ed. Gil-Soo Han (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023), 216–217.

30 Myungji Yang, "Defending "Liberal Democracy"? Why Older South Koreans Took to the Streets against the 2016–2017 Candlelight Protests," *Mobilization: An International Journal* 25, n.º 3 (2020): 378–379, https://doi.org/10.17813/1086-671X-25-3-365.

31 Mandy Mun Yee Chan, "Unveiling Gender Polarization: The Rise of Right-Wing Populism and Anti-Feminism Sentiments among Idaenam," *Korea Journal* 63, n.º 4 (2023): 230–231, https://doi.org/10.25024/kj.2023.63.4.226; Gi-Woo Roh and Hee-Joon Kim, "The Rise of the South Korean Alt-Right: The 'Silent Counter-Revolution' of Young Men," *Journal of Youth*

tomed to traditional values and a collectivist view of the state, these drastic socio-cultural shifts were perceived as the wholesale collapse of the national identity and moral foundation they had long defended. Driven to the precipice by the dual loss of political power and cultural hegemony, the conservative masses resisting these pluralistic changes were drawn into the far-right historical revisionist paradigm forged by New Right intellectuals.

The historical revisionism of the New Right framed the progressive trend of embracing diversity not merely as a policy difference, but as a threat posed by internal enemies seeking to subvert the state system. Simultaneously, it provided a rationale that glorified the era of authoritarian rule as a monumental decision for national survival and a heroic age of industrialization. For the conservative public, this ideology served as an ideological sanctuary that justified their sense of deprivation and anger. Co-opted by the New Right's historical revisionism and crisis narratives, the far-right-leaning public came to define themselves as the last patriotic warriors taking to the streets to rescue a collapsing nation, thereby forming a mass far-right bloc. Indeed, even in opinion polls conducted in 2025, after the martial law crisis had been resolved, the population classified as far-right reached 13 to 21 percent. Furthermore, it was revealed that 40 percent of conservative party supporters harbored far-right leanings.[32]

5. Legitimacy of Civil War, provided by Far Right's Crisis Narrative

The crisis narrative did not remain confined to a vague sense of anxiety; rather, it acquired persuasiveness by designating concrete and actual enemies, consequently exacerbating the political polarization of South

Studies (2025): 10, https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2025.2518949.

32 Young-jun Choi and Ji-eun Hwang, "The Far Right Rises to the Surface – Current State of the Far Right in Korean Society," *Korea Research*, published May 28, 2025, accessed May 26, 2026, https://hrcopinion.co.kr/archives/32972; Se-young Lee, "4 out of 10 People Power Party Supporters Show 'Far-Right' Leanings... 1.8 Times Higher Than the Democratic Party" [in Korean], *Hankyoreh*, September 17, 2025, https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/politics/politics_general/1219116.html.

Korean society into a *de facto* civil war. In this context, China was perceived as an external enemy, while the Democratic Party and other progressive groups were identified as internal enemies threatening the nation. This perception amplified an aversion toward the Democratic Party and parliamentary politics as a whole, predominantly among young men in their twenties and thirties, serving as a driving force that contributed to the election of the conservative presidential candidate Yoon Suk-yeol in 2022. Furthermore, it functioned as the decisive backdrop for the far-right public to mobilize and form a massive bloc even after the 2024-2025 martial law crisis. This demonstrates that the crisis narrative did not merely remain at the level of theoretical discourse but exerted substantive political power to mobilize mass action; the crisis narrative culminated in the logic that the existing democratic system alone was inadequate to defeat the enemies threatening the state; therefore, national security and survival had to be secured foremost, even if it necessitated a suspension of the democratic order.

While anti-communism in the past was primarily directed at North Korea, as South Korea's national power came to overwhelmingly surpass the North in the twenty-first century, the fear of North Korea gradually lost its popular persuasiveness. This void was subsequently filled by China. In particular, following Xi Jinping's ascent to power, as China conspicuously pursued aggressive foreign policies—including the expansionist projection of influence through the Belt and Road Initiative, the repressive governance of Hong Kong and the Xinjiang Uyghur region, and demonstrations of military force around Taiwan and the South China Sea—the crisis narrative posited by far-right forces began to gain traction. South Korean citizens, too, experienced a massive economic blow due to the 2016 THAAD deployment and the ensuing *Han-han-ryeong*.[33] Furthermore, through a succession of events—in-

33 The 2016 THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) deployment in South Korea, designed to deter North Korean missiles, elicited severe diplomatic conflict with China. Perceiving its radar as a security threat, Beijing imposed *Han-han-ryeong* (Ban on Korean Culture)—unofficial but systematic economic sanctions strictly restricting South Korean cultural exports and tourism.

cluding the 'Northeast Project' concerning the history of Manchuria,[34] China's cultural policies attempting to subsume Kimchi and Hanbok as its subcultures, the daily damages caused by fine dust blowing from China, and the COVID-19 pandemic originating in China—public dissatisfaction and animosity toward China accumulated. Compounded by an economic sense of crisis that China was usurping South Korean technologies in core industries such as semiconductors and batteries, thereby threatening jobs, anti-China sentiment came to be regarded as a legitimate response to defend South Korean identity.[35] Far-right forces actively appropriated this public aversion and sense of crisis toward China as an instrument for expanding their political influence. Specifically, far-right YouTubers incited blind public hostility through Sinophobic content riddled with fake news and conspiracy theories. They maximized fear of China by propounding the so-called 'fraudulent election theory,' alleging that China was unofficially intervening in South Korea's cyberspace to manipulate public opinion, or mobilizing units of digital hackers to meddle in South Korean elections and rig voting results.[36] Through this process, anti-China discourse expanded beyond mere cultural aversion or economic friction into a political-level security consciousness, claiming that China—an authoritarian and communist regime—poses a direct threat to South Korea's democracy and its very national security.

Internally, animosity toward the Democratic Party and progressive forces provided the fertile ground for the growth of far-right forces. While superficially extolling American-style democracy and advocating

34 China's historiographical project (2002-2007) attempting to incorporate *Goguryeo* and *Balhae* – ancient Korean kingdoms that ruled Manchuria and the northern part of Korean peninsula – into Chinese provincial history. This provoked severe diplomatic friction with South Korea, which views these states as foundational to its national identity.

35 Jongseok Yoon, "Changing South Korean Perceptions of China since the 1992 Normalization of Diplomatic Relations: Complex Patterns of Expectation, Disillusionment, and Hostility" [in Korean], *Critical Review of History* 155 (2026): 180–183, http://dx.doi.org/10.38080/crh.2026.05.155.160.

36 Jang-Hyo Park, "A Study on the Spread of 'Xenophobia' on YouTube for Chinese" [in Korean], *The Journal of the Korea Contents Association* 23, n.º 2 (2023): 288, https://doi.org/10.5392/JKCA.2023.23.02.280; Youngdo Yun, "Conditions of Anti-China Sentiment and the Dynamics of Affect: Focusing on Post-Globalization and YouTube" [in Korean], *The Journal of Modern Chinese Literature* 110 (2025): 181–183, https://doi.org/10.46487/jmcl.2025..110.153.

the defense of liberal democracy against communism, far-right forces exhibit paradoxical behavior by harboring a strong aversion to the parliamentary system, the very foundation of democracy. This paradox stems from the fact that the 'liberal democracy' they advocate is not anchored in procedural representation or parliamentarism but rather places its emphasis on justifying the powerful leadership and sovereign decisions of a strong leader. Within their distorted cognitive framework, the legislature—dominated by the liberal and progressive Democratic Party—is stigmatized as the chief culprit driving the nation into crisis. The political correctness and feminism policies of the progressive bloc under the banner of protecting minorities and the vulnerable were perceived as a severe disadvantage and reverse discrimination by young men, who already suffered the double burden of competing with both older generations and women. Compounded by soaring real estate prices, the incompetence and hypocrisy of the Democratic administration—exposed through the Cho Kuk scandal[37] and the Incheon International Airport Corporation Crisis[38]—were viewed as having deprived them of opportunities for wealth accumulation and betrayed the core value of fairness.[39] Ultimately, the intense disillusionment and animosity toward the parliamentary politics led by the Democratic Party coalesced with the far-right's framing, which categorized the entire liberal and progressive bloc as an 'internal enemy' ruining the nation. Consequently, a regressive phenomenon emerged wherein a substantial segment of the public abandoned liberal values and procedural democracy, instead yearning for a dictatorial leadership in which power is heavily concentrated in the presidency.[40] The far-right forces gained the support of a

37 Political controversy in 2019, involving allegations of academic admissions fraud and financial irregularities by the family of Justice Minister Cho Kuk under the *Moon Jae-in* administration. It undermined the Democratic Party's moral legitimacy by exposing a perceived hypocrisy between its progressive rhetoric on equity and entrenched elite privileges.

38 Socio-political dispute triggered by the abrupt conversion of subcontracted security guards to regular status in 2020. This policy provoked fierce backlash from younger generations, highlighting deep societal tensions over meritocracy and procedural fairness.

39 Gui Young Han, "Discussion on the Conservatization of Men in Their 20s, Their History and Implications" [in Korean], *Politics & Public Opinion* 29 (2021): 194–195, https://doi.org/10.23356/ppo.2021.29..005.

40 Jin-Wook Shin, "Diagnosis and Prospects of Korean Democracy after Martial Law and

substantial portion of the public with a paradoxical claim: to defend liberal democracy, democracy itself must in practice be rejected.

Former President Yoon Suk-yeol's declaration of emergency martial law on December 3, 2024, must therefore be analyzed as more than a mere attempt to suspend the constitutional order; rather, it represents the physical explosion of the crisis narrative at the very pinnacle of state power. The inauguration of the Yoon administration (2022-2025) itself was rooted in this soil of historical revisionism. Former President Yoon captured power by stimulating regressive anti-communism and xenophobic animosity toward China, and by skillfully channeling the *ressentiment* of young men against liberal parties and labor unions into political support. Throughout its three years in power, the Yoon administration stripped the liberal bloc, including the main opposition party, of its political legitimacy by defining them as "anti-state forces," and stigmatized labor unions and civic organizations as "interest cartels." Furthermore, it thoroughly disregarded democratic and pluralistic values by maintaining a hostile stance toward the advancement of gender equality and the protection of rights for LGBTQ+ individuals, refugees, and immigrants.[41] This was, in essence, a process of constantly reproducing and reinforcing the crisis narrative that the Republic of Korea was being dismantled by the 'internal enemies' of pluralism and progressive values.

Guided by this ideological framework, the Yoon Suk-yeol administration attempted to suspend democratic constitutional procedures and establish a powerful repressive regime centered on the president. The declaration of emergency martial law executed on December 3, 2024 was the inevitable outcome of a crisis narrative that framed the normal democratic activities of the opposition bloc and civil society as

Impeachment: Focusing on Power Elites, the Far-Right Organizational Ecology, and the Party Systems" [in Korean], *Economy and Society* 147 (2025): 188, http://dx.doi.org/10.18207/criso.2025..147.164.

41 Byong-kuen Jhee, "Korea 2023: Deepening Political Conflict and the Retreat of Parliamentary Politics" [in Korean], *The Journal of Asiatic Studies* 67, n.º 1 (2024): 37–38, https://doi.org/10.31930/JAS.2024.03.67.1.9; WooJin Kang, "Reexamining the Theory of Backsliding and Crisis of the Korean Democracy – The Case of the Yoon Seok-yeol Government" [in Korean], *Economy and Society* 142 (2024): 370–372, http://dx.doi.org/10.18207/criso.2024..142.355.

a threat to national security. The martial law proclamation announced at the time reads as follows:

> Martial Law Command proclaims the following as of 11 p.m. on December 3, 2024, in order to protect liberal democracy from anti-state forces active within the free Republic of Korea and their threats to subvert the state, and to ensure public safety.
>
> 1. All political activities, including activities of the National Assembly, local councils, political parties, and political association, rallies and demonstrations, are prohibited.
>
> 2. All acts that deny or attempt to overthrow the free democratic system are prohibited. The dissemination of fake news, manipulation of public opinion, and false propaganda are prohibited....[42]

As such, this proclamation clearly reveals the far right's crisis narrative that 'anti-state forces' are operating clandestinely within the nation, making extralegal martial law inevitable to eradicate them. Following the martial law declaration, this crisis narrative repeatedly appeared in the five public addresses delivered by Yoon Suk-yeol to the nation. Notably, the key contents of his address given on December 12, 2024 are as follows:

> ... The National Assembly, dominated by the giant opposition party, has become not the bedrock of liberal democracy, but a monster that destroys the liberal democratic constitutional order. ... As such, the Republic of Korea is now in a state where national affairs are paralyzed and social order is disrupted by the parliamentary dictatorship and tyranny of the giant opposition party, rendering the normal functioning of the executive and judicial branches impossible. ... Will it not become a coun-

42 "Full text of martial law decree," *Yonhap News Agency*, accessed May 28, 2026, https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20241204001100320.

> try where spies run rampant, drugs ruin our future generations, and organized crime syndicates run amok? At all costs, we must prevent the very forces and criminal groups that have thus far spearheaded the paralysis of state affairs and the subversion of the constitutional order from seizing control of the government and threatening the future of the Republic of Korea. I will fight to the very end. ... [43]

Yoon's address urgently asserts that South Korea faces an existential crisis orchestrated by enemies both internal and external. Naturally, because the actual situation in South Korea during the winter of 2024 was stable, the vast majority of citizens did not subscribe to this crisis narrative. Consequently, the National Assembly was able to pass the impeachment against President Yoon (Dec. 14, 2024). Nevertheless, the far right's crisis narrative did not dissipate. Far-right politicians, intellectuals, and their sympathizers did not view the martial law declaration, a blatant violation of the Constitution, as an illegal act; rather, they actively supported it, perceiving it as an inevitable and sovereign decision to restore national identity.

The crisis narrative forged by historical revisionism was amplified by far-right agitators known as the 'asphalt right-wing,' culminating in a riot on January 19, 2025, when far-right supporters, enraged by the issuance of an arrest warrant for former President Yoon Suk-yeol, stormed the Seoul Western District Court. In South Korean politics, the term asphalt right-wing refers to a faction of conservative activists who prioritize street protests, public rallies, and mass demonstrations over traditional legislative or parliamentary politics. This movement is most prominently associated with Pastor Jeon Kwang-hoon, the head of the Sarang Jeil Church. For over two decades, Jeon has been the leading figure of this faction, effectively mobilizing his supporters onto the streets of Seoul. Opposing Yoon's impeachment, Pastor Jeon has

43 Suk-yeol Yoon, "Address to the Nation" [in Korean], spoken December 12, 2024, https://www.korea.kr/briefing/speechView.do?newsId=132037302, accessed May 28, 2026.

relentlessly incited the masses through online and offline rallies, ceaselessly invoking the "national right of resistance." The right of resistance is the ultimate right of citizens to employ all available means, including physical force, to defend their rights and freedoms when state authority infringes upon or dismantles the fundamental democratic order. Echoing the far right's crisis narrative, the argument posits that because the Republic of Korea is besieged by internal and external crises, this right of resistance must be invoked to restore national security. The core arguments he advanced while proclaiming the right of resistance immediately following Yoon's impeachment are as follows:

> First, ... we declare the impeachment of President Yoon Suk-yeol fundamentally null and void.
>
> Second, invoking the national right of resistance, an authority transcending the Constitution, we declare the immediate reinstatement of President Yoon Suk-yeol, the Prime Minister, and the Cabinet.
>
> ...
>
> Fourth, we declare the dismantling of the National Election Commission for orchestrating fraudulent elections, the dissolution of the National Assembly elected through illegal elections, and the holding of new elections within three months.
>
> ...
>
> Seventh, we declare the complete eradication of the Jusapa (pro-North Korean communist) forces, including the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions and the National Union of Media Workers, which have been hijacked by spies.
>
> ...
>
> Ninth, we declare that the Yoon administration must immediately dismiss the incompetent and those who resisted martial law, replacing them with individuals faithful to the founding spirit of President Syngman Rhee, who established the Repub-

> lic of Korea, and the industrialization spirit of President Park Chung-hee. ... [44]

As such, the far right's claim to invoke the right of resistance aimed to justify martial law in accordance with their crisis narrative, and to legitimize violence against opposing forces. Indeed, this agitation materialized into an unprecedented act of terrorism on January 19, 2025, when ca. 300 far-right supporters occupied the Seoul Western District Court for three hours.[45] The rioters, shouting the "right of resistance" instilled in them by Pastor Jeon, vandalized court property and assaulted police officers. Subsequent police investigations into the approximately 150 individuals arrested revealed that Pastor Jeon's remarks on the right of resistance served as the core criminal motive and catalyst for their actions. Consequently, this crisis led to Pastor Jeon's arrest on charges of inciting rebellion and orchestrating the riot. Although he stood trial, he has not ceased his incitement of civil war, continuing to insist that "only the right of resistance can set the country right."[46] For the far-right forces, consumed by a fabricated fear that the liberal bloc, including labor unions and civic groups, is colluding with the Chinese Communist Party to sell out the country, the attack on the judiciary was not a mere protest, but a 'holy war for national salvation' and a 'civil war' requiring them to do whatever it takes to rescue the state. Based on the historical legitimacy conferred by the crisis narrative of the New Right's historical revisionism, the agitation for the right of resistance led by Pastor Jeon and far-right YouTubers attempted to instigate an illusory crisis and drive the public into a violent state of civil war.

44 Kwang-won Lee, "Jeon Kwang-hoon, Chairman of the National Revolution: 'The 12-Point Gwanghwamun Declaration on National Resistance'" [in Korean], *News A*, December 28, 2024, https://www.newsa.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=323614.

45 Go-eun Park and Tae-woo Park, "'Find the Judge!': Yoon Supporters Armed with Bludgeons Storm Court in Night of Terror," *Hankyoreh*, January 20, 2025, https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/1178883.html.

46 Newsdesk, "The 'Right of National Resistance' Spreading Like a Virus... 'A Grave Crime Inciting Rebellion'" [in Korean], *MBC*, January 19, 2026, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MX7O5cf5K4o.

6. Conclusion: Beyond the Politics of Crisis Narrative

President Yoon Suk-yeol's declaration of martial law is a political event that demonstrates how the crisis narrative, based on far-right historical revisionism, can subvert the constitutional order and violently abuse state power for the illusion of restoring an anti-communist national identity. From this perspective, this article argued that the historical revisionism of the South Korean far right is not merely an academic reinterpretation of the past or the distortion of isolated facts; rather, it is a destructive political project aimed at fomenting a *de facto* civil war and intentionally derailing the democratic rule of law. Within the crisis narrative forged by these far-right forces, liberal policies, such as the advancement of democratization and the guarantee of human rights for marginalized groups like workers, LGBTQ+ individuals, and persons with disabilities, are transformed into threats that dismantle the state system. Conversely, far-right rioters destroying the constitutional order are elevated to the status of 'martyrs' and 'patriotic citizens' fighting against a national crisis. The civil war mindset, the belief that the nation will perish unless the opposition is defeated, ultimately resulted in glorifying even anti-constitutional acts of violence, such as illegal martial law declaration and the Western District Court riot, as the legitimate right of resistance exercised by patriotic citizens to rescue the system. Their paradoxical declaration to protect South Korea's liberal democracy from its enemies has, instead, spawned a fascistic rampage and a politics of hatred that threatens the very existence of democracy.

However, amid the global rise of far-right forces and the widespread threats to democracy, the South Korean case demonstrates that the collective action of citizens seeking to defend constitutional values and the democratic order can still offer hope. Immediately following the declaration of martial law, over 4,000 citizens poured out to the main gates of the National Assembly in the dead of night, halting the unconstitutional martial law troops with their bare hands. Furthermore, during the four months of rallies and protests leading up to the Constitutional Court's decision to impeach Yoon Suk-yeol, millions of citizens participated, demonstrating a resolute will to defend the

Constitution. The process of overcoming the martial law crisis, led by South Korean civil society, confirmed the democratic resilience of South Korean politics in thwarting the far right's attempts to subvert the constitutional order. The martial law crisis also proved the political capacity and agency of the citizens acting as the "*Minjung*" ('common people' in Korean). In the course of South Korea's democratization, citizens have embodied the unique subjective character of the *Minjung*, sharing a collective experience of resistance against prolonged oppression. Throughout modern and contemporary South Korean history, the *Minjung* has been the grassroots masses and the leading protagonists of progressive civil society, consistently resisting the authoritarianism and state violence of the ruling elites.[47] Through active civic participation, citizens dismantled the crisis narrative constructed by the far right to justify their violence, thereby discovering a new democratic hope against oppression. The civic solidarity that emerged during the process of overcoming the December 3 martial law crisis was not driven by the mobilization mechanisms of a specific ideological group. Rather, it was a collective action voluntarily formed by a heterogeneous majority transcending demographic backgrounds, such as generation, gender, and occupation, with the shared goal of defending the democratic constitutional order. This orientation of the *Minjung*, which seeks to embrace diversity, restore the rights of marginalized groups, and rebuild the public sphere, can serve as a crucial mechanism to dismantle the political momentum of the far right's crisis narrative, which reduces the world to a strict dichotomy of insiders as *us* and outsiders as *enemies*.

47 For the meaning and history of the concept of Minjung in South Korean politics, see Lee, *The Making of Minjung*.

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