

In the face of threats, are people willing to do anyth...

Published: January 13, 2026, 3:13 pm

It is hard to know what to make of the failed coup in South Korea that happened overnight.

At one level, this can be seen as the desperate act of a president whose popularity rating was collapsing, and who had lost control of the country's parliament, and as a consequence his ability to push through any legislation that he desired. Aligning what he believed to be his own best interests with those of the state, in a fashion commonplace amongst too many politicians, and most especially those of right wing persuasion, he then declared that those opposing him were seeking to undermine that state, which claim then supposedly justified his actions.

What we now know is that he did not even secure the support of his own party in that parliament when it came to reaction to the coup. The opposition to his declaration was universal amongst those politicians who managed to assemble in the middle of the night, despite military occupation of the parliament, and not a single parliamentarian stood up for him. The coup was over.

That is, however, too simple an interpretation of what happened to be entirely credible. The president, his advisers, and the military had obviously planned what was to happen. That the army was ready and willing to act on the president's unconstitutional orders must be deeply worrying for Koreans this morning. Armies that have tasted power rarely returned to their barracks without consequence. The risk of further instability must, as a result, be high.

The president must have also received some advice that he had potential support for his actions, even if it looks to have been misplaced. It is, again, unlikely that sentiment amongst powerful supporters, of whom he presumably has some, will be easily constrained, although I have read that media condemnation of his actions is almost universal across the spectrum of political viewpoints the media in question. That, at least, provides some hope that stability can be restored.

There can, however, be no believer in democratic government who can take any

comfort from what happened. Support for democracy is hardly in a good place right now. The USA is tottering on the brink of fascism. Neo-fascist parties are securing significant support across Europe. Romania looks as though it might fall under the control of a far-right president. There is significant political instability in Germany and France, to which the far-right is contributing. The UK is governed with indifference by a government that appears intent on promoting a far-right alternative to itself. This is not a moment when believers in universal suffrage and the right of the individual to be represented within the power hierarchies of the state can be relaxed. I am, most certainly, anything but relaxed.

For me, the biggest lesson from last night's failed coup is that even in what look like stable democracies there are those who think that the time has come to overthrow democratic government. For a long time I did not think that this would happen in my lifetime, but now it is, and there is popular support for that to happen.

I suspect that for some time people might have thought me to be a little extreme when stating on this blog that the whole system of democratic government was under threat. The reality that this is the case is now overwhelmingly clear. The question arising is, are people willing to do anything to defend it?