

Research Article

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May God Protect Korea from the Deluge: An Analysis of Protestant Support for Yoon Seok-yeol's Martial Law (2024)

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Abstract: On 3 December 2024, president Yoon Seok-yeol declared martial law, plunging South Korea into an unprecedented political crisis. While officially justified as a response to alleged communist infiltration, it soon became clear that Yoon's real objective was to suppress parliamentary opposition. Impeached in April 2025, his authoritarian turn revealed the deep social and political polarisation within South Korea. Although international media framed the crisis as an isolated power grab lacking popular support, this study shows that martial law found a favourable reception among certain conservative and Protestant groups. Convinced that the Democratic Party was orchestrating a communist conspiracy, these groups rallied in defence of Yoon, often resorting to conspiratorial and sometimes biblical rhetoric, especially within evangelical churches. To better understand how Korean Protestants engage with martial law and politics, we examined the history of Protestantism in Korea and conducted qualitative interviews with premillennialist and Presbyterian believers. While our fieldwork highlights the use of religious references – such as the Book of Revelation and the story of Sodom and Gomorrah – to interpret political and social realities, it also challenges the notion of an intrinsic and unbreakable link between Protestantism and conservatism. Attitudes towards Mr Yoon proved plural, albeit marked by strong elective affinities with conservative visions of society. In fact, this research shows that Korean Protestants are widely opposed to communism and to the inclusive agendas promoted by progressive parties, which

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are perceived as threats to the traditional family – indicating a society deeply divided between two incompatible moral and social visions.

Keywords: Martial Law (South Korea, 2024); Polarization (South Korea); Religion and Politics (South Korea); Protestant conservatism (South Korea); Interviews with Korean Protestants



Cover photo: View of a preaching van belonging to the evangelical *The Light and Salt Church* on Sejong Boulevard, Seoul. © Adrian Gasser, December 2024.

1 The 2024 South Korean Martial Law: A Facade for Authoritarian Revival

On 3 December 2024, at 11 p.m., South Korean President Yoon Seok-yeol announced the imposition of martial law in a televised address. From the head of state's perspective, this measure had become unavoidable to safeguard liberal South Korea from destabilisation attempts by two threatening forces: North Korea itself and its

hidden supporters within the country. Although diplomatic relations with Pyongyang have been disastrous since the collapse of negotiations in 2020 – the year North Korea destroyed the inter-Korean liaison office at the border¹ – the president scarcely mentioned the risk of military escalation with the North. In his speech, he primarily emphasised the internal threat, which he attributed to ‘pro-Pyongyang anti-state elements’. Through this ambiguous term, Mr Yoon was not referring to a secret guerrilla, but rather to members of the Democratic Party of Korea (or *Minjudang*, centre-left party with economically liberal views)² – his rivals in the National Assembly. According to the president, these “criminals” were directly responsible for leading the country into a “parliamentary dictatorship”, suppressing citizens’ freedoms, and orchestrating an “internal rebellion”. He thus justified the need to “eliminate” them in order to restore order in South Korea.³

Unpopular due to his rigidity, nepotism, liberal policies, and harsh stance towards the press,⁴ Mr Yoon had faced a turbulent presidency well before the events of 3 December. His term was regularly marked by personal scandals, intense

1 Kang In-cheol reports that anti-communist leaflets sent across the border by activists and Protestant organisations – including *Voice of the Martyrs Korea* – provided Pyongyang with a pretext to suspend dialogue with Seoul (Kang 2020). When it comes to the risk of inter-Korean conflict, we share the view of analysts like Sébastien Falletti (*Le Figaro*), who argue that the status quo is likely to persist, as it better suits the major powers than the unpredictable scenario of nuclear war. Meanwhile, both South Korea’s right-wing and the North Korean regime exploit rising tensions, as these provide diplomatic leverage and serve as tools for domestic mobilisation: Pons 2020.

2 Although frequently labelled a communist party by conservatives, the Democratic Party of Korea is structured around a moderately redistributive and economically liberal agenda – to the extent that it is often compared to Germany’s conservative CDU. Accommodating towards the *chaebols* – the industrial conglomerates that drive South Korea’s export-oriented model (with LG, Samsung, Hyundai, and SK accounting for 40 % of GDP in 2023) – the Democratic Party has implemented labour market deregulation measures since the Asian financial crisis of 1997 to stimulate an economy heavily reliant on these conglomerates. Bringing together various liberal political factions united in their opposition to the Conservative Party – notably due to the conservatives’ desire to strengthen ties with the United States and Japan – *Minjudang* stands in sharp contrast to the smaller progressive parties in the National Assembly (the Green Party, Progressive Party, Labour Party, and Justice Party), some of which have refused to form alliances with the Democrats, whom they view as “pro-capitalist”. These progressive parties, more closely aligned with trade unions and workers’ movements, advocate for a substantial increase in social welfare and labour rights, stronger environmental policies and regulation of the productive system, and greater inclusion of social minorities: Hwang 2024: 1–11.

3 The full speech by President Yoon Suk-yeol was translated and published by the newspaper *Korea JoongAng Daily*: Korea JoongAng Daily 2024.

4 Despite constitutional guarantees, press freedom in South Korea remains fragile. Journalists often face intimidation when publishing articles perceived as overly critical of the government or *chaebol* conglomerates. The government exerts pressure on public broadcasters such as MBC and KBS through defamation and national security lawsuits, while the *chaebols* undermine private media outlets like *The Korea Herald*, *Hankyoreh* or *Kyunghyang* by threatening their advertising revenue.

parliamentary debates, and budgetary deadlocks – none of which were unusual given the semi-presidential and majoritarian nature of the South Korean political system.⁵ In order to regain control of a political scene dominated by the opposition, Mr Yoon declared a state of exception, suspending parliamentary activities and authorizing military intervention in political and media spheres. The imposition of martial law marked a major turning point in the exercise of presidential power in democratic Korea, as no president elected by universal suffrage since 1987 had ever resorted to military rule. To justify these exceptional measures, which were unanimously deemed unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court, the president relied on a security-focused, anti-communist, and repressive rhetoric.

A few hours after the president's speech, an angry crowd gathered in front of the National Assembly in Yeouido, an upscale district of Seoul. Despite the cold night and the curfew, some 16,000 people confronted 197 soldiers from the 707th Unit, a special forces battalion trained to eliminate enemy leaders during wartime. Deployed under exceptional circumstances, the unit had been ordered to block access to the Assembly chamber. Rushing from their homes, opposition lawmakers managed to outrun the soldiers and climb over the Assembly's outer wall – a physical effort that enabled them to vote for the repeal of martial law. Facing dissent within his own party, the People Power Party (or Conservative Party), Mr Yoon lifted the state of emergency at dawn, though he refused to resign or reconsider the justifications he had given for suspending political activity.

In the days that followed, police investigations and journalistic inquiries were launched in an effort to uncover the president's true intentions. The issue sparked intense debate on social media and Korean TV channels, fueling speculation, rumours, and conspiracy theories.⁶ However, there is considerable evidence to suggest that the imposition of martial law was intended to silence political opponents of Mr Yoon.⁷ A clear sign of this was that the army had been tasked with arresting the

See an interview with Choi Seung-ho, independent investigative journalist at *Newstapa*: Ojardias 2017: 49–51.

⁵ With a strong executive and a winner-takes-all electoral system, South Korea's semi-presidential regime is marked by intense polarisation between the two dominant political parties.

⁶ For those outside the inner circles of high politics, it is difficult to distinguish proven offences from potentially exaggerated charges. To illustrate the polyphony prevailing on the peninsula, a rumour circulated by Army officers claims that Mr Yoon had planned to have American soldiers assassinated and to disguise their deaths as a North Korean attack, in order to push Washington into bombing Pyongyang. It remains unclear whether this story was a desperate invention by soldiers seeking to avoid prosecution – by attributing such extreme intentions to the head of state – or, more alarmingly, the desperate act of a president flirting with Armageddon. This rumour was reported, among others, by *Le Monde* and the collaborative site *People's Dispatch*: Mesmer 2024a; Park 2024.

⁷ Lambert 2025.

leaders of the Democratic and Conservative parties – respectively Mr Lee Jae-Myung and Mr Han Dong-Hoon – and authorised to use force during confrontations with parliamentarians. Shaken by this reminder of the darkest hours of the dictatorial period,⁸ hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets to demand the president's resignation.⁹ To the rhythm of K-pop melodies from girl groups and *minjung kayo*¹⁰ – musical repertoires that aestheticise protest and express affiliation with progressive groups¹¹ – spectacular demonstrations brought together ordinary citizens, democratic activists, trade unionists, students, Catholics, and Buddhists in the streets of Seoul.

Under the combined pressure of citizen mobilisation,¹² the *Minjudang* Party's electoral opportunism, and the crucial defection of a small number of conservative MPs, Mr Yoon was impeached by the National Assembly on 14 December – just ten days after having undermined democratic institutions. The Corruption Investigation

8 From 1948 to 1987, South Korea was governed almost continuously by authoritarian regimes. Under pressure from massive pro-democracy protests, military president Chun Doo-hwan agreed, on 29 June 1987, to introduce direct universal suffrage for presidential elections. His decision was reportedly motivated, among other factors, by the risk of South Korea losing its right to host the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games, as well as by the United States' refusal to support any potential repression of the demonstrators: Guex 2016: 243.

9 It is estimated that one third of the protesters were women between the ages of 20 and 30 – a trend partly fuelled by the anti-feminist and overtly male-centred policies enacted by President Yoon, notably his controversial 2022 decision to dismantle the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family: Mesmer 2024c.

10 Girls' Generation's 2007 song *Into the New World* has been adopted as an anthem during the protests against President Yoon. *Minjung kayo* refers to protest songs created by student activists in Korean universities during the 1970s, under the authoritarian rule of Park Chung-hee.

11 In both academic and political discourse, the term “progressive” is frequently applied to a wide array of actors – from the Democratic Party and its allies to LGBTQ+ activists, labour movements, trade unions, and virtually any group opposing the People Power Party. This linguistic shortcut tends to obscure significant ideological and strategic differences. Although these groups generally share a strong commitment to democracy and varying degrees of support for redistributive policies, they remain divided in terms of economic doctrine, social policy, and electoral strategy. Emerging from the pro-democracy movements of the 1980s, South Korea's progressive camp has always been internally fragmented – encompassing Marxist, revolutionary, socialist, social-liberal, and, more recently, environmentalist orientations. Often suspected of harbouring North Korean sympathisers, the workers' and Marxist parties have been gradually marginalised or absorbed by the Democratic Party over successive elections, which has consolidated much of the progressive vote under the country's winner-takes-all electoral system (Hwang 2024). See also Namhee Lee, who highlights the elitist and university-based orientation of the currently dominant social-liberal current: Lee 2022: 25–28.

12 Since the founding of the Republic in 1948, the executive and intelligence services have wielded significant power – a situation largely stemming from the enduring threat of inter-Korean conflict. With no legal avenues – other than elections – for citizens to contest government authority, public protest has increasingly become a regular means of influencing policy or judicial rulings.

Office for High-ranking Officials (CIO), empowered to investigate, summoned Mr Yoon three times to question him over what the agency described as a “rebellion against the constitutional order and insurrection”. By disregarding these summonses, Mr Yoon obstructed the judicial process, which ultimately led to the issuance of an arrest warrant against him on 31 December. From the presidential residence, where he had voluntarily confined himself since 14 December, the deposed head of state decided to play his final card. Shielded by his lawyers and determined to exploit any legal loophole to delay the investigation, Yoon Seok-yeol also fuelled anti-communist sentiment among right-wing circles and Protestant churches in an effort to rally support. On 3 January 2025, a force of 150 CIO and police officers attempted to apprehend Mr Yoon at the presidential residence, but the operation failed due to strong resistance from a military unit,¹³ agents of the Presidential Security Service (PSS), and 1,200 civilians who formed a human shield to prevent the arrest.¹⁴ Mr Yoon was eventually detained and incarcerated on 15 January after a large-scale police operation involving 1,500 officers, which eventually enabled investigators to conduct direct interrogations. On 4 April 2025, the Constitutional Court unanimously upheld Mr Yoon’s impeachment, clearing the way for early presidential elections in June (Photo 2). Having lost presidential immunity, he now faces a criminal trial that could result in a life sentence or even the death penalty.¹⁵

2 The Right Is Dying, but Refuses to Surrender

In Western media, the political crisis in Korea was largely framed as a standoff between Mr Yoon and a population with legitimate democratic aspirations. The president’s authoritarian turn was often portrayed as an isolated, possibly irrational act, while the popular mobilisation was seen as evidence that Korean democracy remained robust, united, and unwilling to accept military interference. According to the BBC, which covered the events extensively, “South Korea is a

¹³ Acting under the authority of the Presidential Security Service (PSS), the 55th Guard Corps of the Capital Defence Command was deployed on 3 January to reinforce the security personnel tasked with preventing Mr Yoon’s arrest. Since its involvement was later criticised by the Ministry of Defence, this unit should not be considered as representative of the South Korean military as a whole: Korea JoongAng Daily 2025.

¹⁴ Le Monde with AFP 2025.

¹⁵ Mesmer 2025.



Photo 2: A young supporter of Yoon Seok-yeol stands demoralised on Sam-il Boulevard, Seoul, in the wake of the Constitutional Court's verdict, 4 April 2025. © Adrian Gasser, April 2025.

stable democracy – but it is a noisy one. And it refused to accept another authoritarian diktat.”¹⁶ This assessment is partly accurate. Yet, by interpreting the imposition of martial law merely as a resurgence of ‘Eastern despotism,’ many commentators failed to both anticipate and explain the emergence of support movements for Mr Yoon – movements whose vitality and scale likely surprised observers beyond the peninsula.

While an estimated 75 % of South Koreans supported Mr Yoon’s removal from office, the presidential camp still enjoys significant backing among voters of the People Power Party and members of conservative Protestant churches. Although these groups constitute a political minority,¹⁷ their interpretation of the ongoing crisis deserves attention, as it sheds light on a conservative counter-mobilisation that has grown since the impeachment of Ex-President Park Geun-hye in 2016. If the declaration of martial law revealed the persistence of political mechanisms inherited from the authoritarian era, it also demonstrated that a significant number of South Koreans – fully integrated within the democratic system – were in favour of it.¹⁸

¹⁶ Bicker 2024.

¹⁷ Following the April 2024 legislative elections, the presidential bloc – made up of the People Power Party and its satellite, the People’s Future Party – holds just 108 of the 300 seats in the National Assembly, far behind the Democratic Alliance of Korea’s 176 seats: Pons 2024.

¹⁸ A January 2025 poll conducted by the Korea Public Opinion Review Institute (KOPRA) found that around 40 % of respondents still supported Mr Yoon, despite the imposition of martial law. *The Korea Times* even reported an increase in his approval rating following his removal from office: Jung 2025.

2.1 A Polarised Socio-Political Landscape

On 14 December, while attention was focused on the 200,000 people gathered in Yeouido to support the impeachment motion, Mr Yoon's allies organised their own demonstration in the heart of Seoul (Photo 3). Coming from all over the country, around 40,000 conservatives gathered along Sejong Boulevard, in front of Gwanghwamun Gate – a site highly symbolic of South Korean nationalism. It was along this boulevard that the Republic of Korea was proclaimed, and it remains a regular gathering place for political groups from across the spectrum. In stark contrast to the wealthy and well-educated residents of Seoul, the clothing worn by these demonstrators revealed their modest social origins. Wearing poor-quality synthetic coats and shoes, plastic visors, and permed hairsyles, they exchanged smiles and small gestures of sympathy with us. The crowd was predominantly composed of elderly individuals raised in a deeply anti-communist culture. Impoverished by decades of colonial rule and a devastating civil war, this generation poured its sweat and blood into the country's factories and workshops to rebuild Korea and drive its economic miracle. As a lasting source of pride, many hold the conviction that they were the architects of the country's rapid transformation into one of the world's most prosperous economic powerhouses. Fuelled by conspiracy theories circulated on YouTube by far-right influencers – who have become a primary source of information for Koreans with lower levels of education and those disengaged from mainstream media, particularly the elderly¹⁹ – many sincerely believe that the Democrats rigged the 2024 legislative



Photo 3: Rows of flower wreaths bearing messages of support for Mr Yoon lined the streets surrounding the Presidential Office in Seoul, Seoul. © Adrian Gasser, December 2024.

¹⁹ Lee 2024.

elections to secure a parliamentary majority. According to this narrative, the goal of these so-called “traitors” is to paralyse the government and ultimately hand the country over to the communists.²⁰

Echoing the conspiratorial rhetoric of MAGA (Make America Great Again) activists – who claim that the 2020 US presidential election was “stolen” by the Democrats – South Korean demonstrators marched with placards bearing the slogan *Stop the Steal*. In Korea, allegations of electoral fraud and irregularities have become a powerful rallying cry for the right since the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye in 2016. In power since 2008, the Conservative Party suffered a crushing electoral defeat following the *Choigate* scandal – a case that directly implicated President Park Geun-hye, a shamanic advisor, the Samsung conglomerate, and the intelligence services.²¹ Found guilty of corruption and abuse of power by a special team of prosecutors that notably included Yoon Suk-yeol, President Park was impeached and later sentenced to prison. While the scandal sparked widespread outrage and mobilised several million citizens,²² the impeachment process – and the subsequent shift in political power – also gave birth to the *Taegeukgi* movement.²³ Initially mobilised in defence of Ms Park, this conservative countermovement began modestly but gradually gained momentum.

²⁰ A conspiracy theory, unsupported by any official evidence, claims that the so-called “progressive camp” was allegedly funded by China and directed by Pyongyang – a theory that continues to gain ground among right-wing circles.

²¹ Park Geun-hye, rival to the conservative Lee Myung-bak (president from 2008 to 2013), succeeded in revitalising the Grand National Party in 2012, which was then the leading conservative party in Korea but whose popularity had been damaged by corruption scandals. As leader of a new right-wing party, the Liberty Party (*Saenuri*), Ms Park was elected president in 2013. Her presidency was marked by authoritarian shifts and criticism over her mishandling of the 2014 Sewol ferry disaster. Ms Park (daughter of the dictator Park Chung-hee) maintained a mysterious relationship with the shaman Choi Soon-sil, herself the daughter of an influential guru who advised Park Chung-hee during his rule. In 2016, a journalist revealed that Choi Soon-sil exercised strong influence over the president, to the extent of advising, if not directing, her on routine state matters. In addition, the two women embezzled funds extorted from Samsung, with assistance from the National Intelligence Service (NIS), to finance their luxurious lifestyle: Joineau 2018: 35–50.

²² In a country with a population of 51 million in 2016, the Candlelight Revolution is said to have mobilised a cumulative total of 17 million protesters between October 2016 and March 2017. This figure counts demonstrators at every rally they took part in. The peak participation in a single day reached 2.3 million demonstrators: Kang 2020.

²³ Reflecting a wish to frame their movement as a patriotic struggle, the counter-mobilisation took its name from South Korea’s national flag, the *Taegeukgi*. A symbol of the independence movement, the flag has become the subject of a struggle for appropriation between progressives and conservatives since Mr Yoon’s attempt to impose martial law: The Korea Times 2024b.

Rallying a range of conservative currents – including the New Right,²⁴ right-wing authoritarianism, and Protestant groups – the movement united voters who were genuinely committed to defending the legacy of the dictatorship and reclaiming political power, even if that meant challenging the legitimacy of South Korea's democratic institutions.

In recent years, conservatives have regularly assembled in large numbers at Gwanghwamun, brandishing giant portraits of authoritarian presidents Syngman Rhee (1948–1960) and Park Chung-hee (1962–1979). In the absence of a collective memory work that might reconcile the ambivalent facets of South Korea's historical trajectory, Korean society remains deeply divided over its past. On one side, democrats regard the era of dictatorship as a dark chapter in which the population was subjected to the arbitrary power of the state – a period marked by army-led massacres (Jeju in 1948, Gwangju in 1980) and torture sessions conducted in the basements of the KCIA.²⁵ On the other, many conservatives idolise the authoritarian presidents, portraying them as guarantors of national security and as the architects of South Korea's spectacular economic rise. Outraged by the policy of reconciliation with the North and by the purges carried out by the first democratic presidents against former collaborators during the colonial period – respectively Kim Young-sam (1993–1998), Kim Dae-jung (1998–2003), and Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2008) – conservatives have organised themselves to proactively defend their vision of national strength and social order. In their view, calls for reunification sound like a dangerous absurdity: North Korea is seen as a rogue, menacing state that deserves no concessions.

²⁴ While South Korean historiography is still largely shaped by a martyrological perspective, portraying Japanese colonisation (1910–1945) as one of the darkest chapters in Korean history, a counter-narrative emerged in the 2000s, arguing that Korea benefited from modernisation through Japan and the United States. Developed by journalists, historians and politicians, the New Right current supports an unbreakable alliance with the United States and Japan – regarded as models of modernity and civilisation – and rejects any rapprochement with North Korea. Although a minority within the South Korean conservative landscape, which generally remains resistant to any laudatory view of Japan, New Right theories have been promoted by Presidents Lee Myung-bak, Park Chung-hee and Yoon Seok-yeol: Tikhonov 2019: 5–36.

²⁵ The Korean Central Intelligence Agency, founded in 1961, was officially responsible for preventing North Korean infiltration. In practice, however, the KCIA engaged in repressive activities against opponents of the South Korean regime (torture sessions, population surveillance). Later renamed the National Intelligence Service (NIS), the agency was found to have secretly influenced public opinion through conservative NGOs in support of Park Geun-hye's presidential campaign. For more details on the KCIA, see Frédéric Ojardias's interview with Choi Seung-ho (*Newstapa*): Ojardias 2017: 49–51.

3 The Religious Dimensions of the Political Crisis

As South Korea's political crisis intensified in early 2025, international media began scrutinising President Yoon's support base. This shift is evident in recent articles highlighting conservative mobilisations and pointing to their ties with conspiracy theories and pro-Trump rhetoric.²⁶ However, to date, no report has offered a clear explanation for the presence and active participation of thousands of Protestant believers in these counter-mobilisations. Most coverage has overlooked the religious dimension of the crisis. When Protestant involvement is mentioned, it is typically limited to *Sarang Jeil Church*²⁷ – despite it being far from representative of South Korean Protestantism as a whole. While this gap may stem from a lack of field familiarity and limited resources for in-depth journalistic investigation, current media coverage largely overlooks the religious dimensions of the political crisis – which are nonetheless essential to its understanding. President Yoon's strategy, partly based on mobilising anti-communist sentiment, has found strong support within the Protestant right. Key forces of the *Taegeukgi* movement and historically allied with authoritarian regimes, several churches have aligned themselves with the ousted president, spreading among their congregants a conspiratorial narrative that attributes the current crisis to electoral fraud and communist infiltration.

3.1 Moses against Amalek:²⁸ The Protestant Right's Political Mobilisation

During the conservative demonstration on 14 December, beneath the immense Christmas tree erected by the Seoul metropolitan council, American, South Korean and Israeli flags were waving under the cold winter sky. Since 2017, evangelical activists have regularly displayed the Israeli flag at right-wing rallies, reflecting their close ties to Christian Zionism (Photo 4).²⁹ Based on a premillennial

²⁶ Falletti 2025; Mesmer 2025; Laffargue 2025.

²⁷ While focused specifically on this Church, Philippe Mesmer's analysis remains well worth reading: Mesmer 2024b.

²⁸ During the 1997 presidential election, Kwon Yong-hae, then head of the intelligence service, attempted to fabricate false evidence to discredit the Democratic Party candidate, Kim Dae-jung, by accusing him of being under North Korean influence. When the plot came to light, Mr Kwon sought to justify himself by presenting himself as Moses fighting against Amalek, the sworn enemy of God's people: Lee 2019: 149.

²⁹ Christian Zionism broadly refers to a theological movement with political implications that emerged in the nineteenth century. It developed out of prophetic interpretations advanced by



Photo 4: View of a pro-Israel demonstration on Sejong Boulevard, Seoul. © Adrian Gasser, December 2024.

eschatology, Korean evangelical Protestants interpret the return of the Jewish people to the Holy Land as the beginning of the end times, which underpins both their Islamophobic stance and their supportive attitude towards Israel.³⁰

Harangued by political activists and Presbyterian pastor Jeon Kwang-hoon of *Sarang Jeil Church*, the crowd directed its anger toward the leader of the opposition party – elected president in June 2025 – shouting in unison: “Stop Lee Jae-myung!” With over 4,000 followers nationwide, *Sarang Jeil* has held group prayers in support of Mr Yoon and organised protests in front of the Constitutional Court to pressure

Protestant thinkers in Anglo-Saxon contexts, particularly in Britain and the United States. These interpreters applied biblical scriptures to contemporary historical events - both current and anticipated - thereby laying the foundation for ethnonationalist narratives in these countries. These narratives drew a distinction between the “Chosen People” – the Jews – and the “Elect Nation” – white Protestants – portraying the UK and the US as righteous nations assisting the Jews in accomplishing God’s plan for humanity. Such ethno-biblical imaginaries have inspired political actions, notably the strong support for the State of Israel among white evangelical Protestants in the United States: Chelini-Pont 2025.

³⁰ Kang 2020.

prosecutors reviewing the impeachment motion's legality.³¹ Once a marginal church less than ten years ago, it has gained new followers by combining Christian faith with anti-communist patriotism – an ideological blend that grants its members a prestigious social role as defenders of both God and the nation. Closely aligned with the Korean New Right's pro-American and anti-communist stance, the church is now the main Protestant group openly supporting Mr Yoon and advocating for martial law. Pastor Jeon frames this as God's will and wholeheartedly endorses the president's conspiratorial narrative, which he actively disseminates through his networks.³²

Although *Sarang Jeil* is a clear example of a Protestant church that openly uses political activism to bolster the conservative movement,³³ there is no evidence that its stance reflects the broader views or beliefs of other Protestant communities. While its actions have been widely documented – particularly its defiance of public health regulations during the COVID-19 pandemic³⁴ – *Sarang Jeil* remains, with its 4,000 members, a relatively small institution compared to the vast congregations of the country's Presbyterian megachurches.³⁵ Out of the 8.5 million South Koreans who identify as Protestant,³⁶ Pastor Jeon's congregation accounts for just 0.05 of this population. It would therefore be misleading to infer a broad alignment between President Yoon and conservative churches based solely on the activism of a few

31 The Church urges its members, via its website, to take part in the protests and collective actions it coordinates: *Sarang Jeil Gyohoe 사랑제일교회* 2025.

32 Choe 2019.

33 Once fragmented, right-wing Presbyterian and evangelical churches came together in a confederation, the Christian Council of Korea (CCK), of which the *Sarang Jeil Church* is a member. Known for its active support of South Korea's conservative movement, the CCK first made headlines in 2003 by mobilising thousands of worshippers in front of Seoul City Hall to denounce the progressive president Roh Moo-hyun, then accused of sympathising with North Korea. Powerful and well-connected, with numerous channels of influence – such as media groups, private theological universities, and even minor political parties (Protestant New Right, Protestant Party) – these churches actively campaign for a pro-American, anti-communist and anti-LGBT agenda: Kang 2020.

34 Unlike Catholics and Buddhists, evangelical churches viewed the lockdown measures enforced by Moon Jae-in's democratic government as a violation of religious freedom. This led to clashes with the police, as some churches – notably *Shincheonji* and *Sarang Jeil* – defied the ban on gatherings and continued holding services throughout the pandemic, thereby contributing to the spread of infections: Choe 2020.

35 The assertive and uninhibited stance of *Sarang Jeil* can be interpreted as a strategy aimed at conquering new segments within a highly competitive religious field. Although it is difficult to verify the exact number of followers, it is estimated that *Onnuri Church* had 80,000 members in 2022, and *Sarang Church* 60,000 in 2011 (not to be confused with *Sarang Jeil Church*): Kim 2022: 177–202.

36 This would represent about 17 % of the South Korean population. Figures come from a national census (Hanguk Gaeleop Josa Yeonguso 한국갤럽조사연구소 2021). A 2024 survey based on a sample of 1,000 respondents estimated that there are over 10 million Protestants in South Korea. Due to differences in methodology, we have chosen to rely on census data: Korea Research 2024.

highly visible groups. Such an interpretation risks obscuring the diversity of South Korean Protestantism and its varied modes of engagement with the political sphere.

The main Protestant traditions were introduced to Korea in the late nineteenth century by Anglo-American missionaries, most of whom were from the United States and generally held politically conservative views. Churches first began to grow after the Korean War (1950–1953)³⁷ and expanded rapidly between 1960 and 1995, with membership rising from one million to 8.5 million. Through the exchange of symbolic and material resources with North American Protestantism – which facilitated the transfer of Reformed doctrines and the training of Korean clergy in the United States – the religious diversity of American churches has gradually been reproduced on the Korean peninsula.³⁸ As a result, South Korean Protestantism is less a unified category than a religious constellation composed of thousands of congregations, often difficult to classify due to their hybrid nature³⁹ and frequent internal schisms. While some churches clearly identify with a specific Protestant tradition,⁴⁰ most evangelical Protestant churches in Korea simply describe themselves as “Christian”. Moreover, the Korean religious landscape is shaped by patterns of syncretism and *religious mobility* (or *butinage*),⁴¹ with churches often combining diverse practices and interpretations of the Bible. These theological distinctions are further complicated by political divisions. On the one hand, there are a small number of liberal churches historically active in pro-democracy movements;⁴² on the other, a larger number of conservative churches whose political involvement is more recent and varies from one congregation to another.

To gain a more representative understanding of Protestant attitudes towards the recent political crisis, we conducted fieldwork in December 2024 among two

³⁷ With the support of Presbyterian dictator Syngman Rhee (1948–1960), South Korea’s post-war reconstruction coincided with an intense phase of evangelisation driven by thousands of Western missionaries offering food relief, education, and spiritual support: Baker 2006: 283–308.

³⁸ Kang 2020.

³⁹ Timothy Lee argues that since the 1907 revival movements, South Korean Protestantism has been shaped predominantly by an evangelical ethos, with the exception, however, of Lutheranism and liberal Presbyterian churches: Lee 2019: 140.

⁴⁰ This is particularly the case for Presbyterian, Calvinist, Methodist and Baptist churches.

⁴¹ Challenging the assumption that religious practice is mostly static and confined to a single spiritual tradition, the concept of *religious butinage* draws attention to the dynamic and selective ways in which individuals navigate, borrow from, and combine diverse religious repertoires: Droz et al. 2016: 251–267.

⁴² While representing less than 20 % of Protestantism overall, their involvement in the movements that brought down the dictatorship in 1987 temporarily linked Protestantism with political progressivism in the collective imagination. Their confederation, the National Council of Churches in Korea (NCKK) comprised only nine member Churches in 2020: Kang 2020.

segments of Protestantism: premillennialist evangelicals and Presbyterians.⁴³ Our findings indicate, first, that support for Mr Yoon and Protestant anti-communism are deeply shaped by biblical worldviews and the historical trajectory of Christianity in Korea. Secondly, our investigation challenges the assumption that Protestants unanimously support Mr Yoon, revealing that the only consistent common denominator among those surveyed is a critical stance toward policies promoting the inclusion of sexual minorities.

3.2 Resisting the Forces of Satan: Meeting with Premillennialist Evangelicals

Kyubok and Jisun

During the demonstration on 14 December, we witnessed a singular event. Equipped with loudspeakers, a preaching van from the evangelical *The Light and Salt Church*⁴⁴ patrolled along Sejong Boulevard, urging passers-by to repent of their sins. Those who did not accept Jesus as the sole path to salvation – such as Catholics who worship the Virgin Mary – were warned they would go to hell. To understand the

⁴³ To refine our analysis, we categorised our Protestant interviewees into two distinct groups. Premillennialist theology, which is rooted in a literal interpretation of the Bible and the Book of Revelation (also referred to as the Apocalypse of John), views the Antichrist as the source of today's crises – political tensions, environmental catastrophes, wars, and more – which are seen as signs heralding the imminent return of Christ. Following His second coming, Christ will inaugurate a thousand-year reign of justice and peace on earth, known as the millennium, before the Last Judgement (Droz 2000; Van Meijl 2001: 16). Among Presbyterians, we included Protestants who place considerable emphasis on the Bible – often interpreted in literal or historical terms – without necessarily subscribing to a millenarian or eschatological worldview. The Presbyterians we interviewed did not believe in the coming of an earthly paradise or in the return of Christ. For them, it is faith that will save them and allow them to reach the heavenly paradise alongside Christ. While not all the Presbyterians we met were affiliated with a major ecclesial structure – typically governed through a synodal system where authority is exercised by assemblies of elders – they consistently emphasised the importance of the pastor's role and the horizontal relationships within the community: Baker 2013.

⁴⁴ The name of this church refers to a biblical metaphor found in the Gospel of Matthew (5:13–14): “At that time, Jesus said to his disciples: ‘You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden.’” When considering the performative dimension of this symbol, this passage calls on believers to positively influence the world by improving it daily, like salt, and to guide others toward faith, like light. The name *Light and Salt* likely signals a desire to distinguish the church from so-called “Sunday Christians” (a critical term for those who limit their religious practice to attending church on Sundays), while encouraging members to be consistent, committed, and evangelical in their faith: Seoul Light and Salt Church 2025.



Photo 5: View of an evangelical preaching booth in Myeongdong, Seoul. © Adrian Gasser, December 2024.

motivations behind this kind of mobilisation (Photo 5), we contacted a member of the evangelical church *For the Never-Ending Revival* (FTNER), which is active in street preaching. Founded in 2020 by Kim Young-hyun, a young theology student, FTNER appears to follow a growth model partially connected to the United States, where it sends missionaries and cultivates ties with a local Presbyterian church.⁴⁵ These initiatives, far from exceptional in the Korean context, highlight the significant role of the United States in the growth of Korean evangelical churches. Benefiting from a Korean diaspora of around two million people, more than 4,000 South Korean churches have been established across the United States. They have used the symbolic resources tied to the empowering image of the USA as a “chosen power” to bolster their legitimacy among Protestants in Korea.⁴⁶ With around twenty pastors, FTNER conducts most of its communication via social media platforms such as YouTube and Instagram, where it publishes religious videos – in both Korean and English – that have garnered tens of thousands of views. In an effort to attract new followers, FTNER positions itself as an alternative to other evangelical churches, which it deems corrupt, and promotes a premillennialist theology of the Apocalypse that blends literal interpretations of the Bible with conspiracy theories.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ In July 2024, the church participated in collective prayers for the “spiritual revival” of the United States. This gathering was organised by *Impakt*, a Presbyterian church based in New Jersey and led by a pastor of Korean origin: FTNER 2025b; *Impakt* 2025.

⁴⁶ According to Professor Kang In-cheol, the belief that the United States has a divine mission is widespread among Korean evangelicals. This belief is reinforced by a sense of gratitude and admiration towards the United States, which is seen as having both evangelised Korea and rescued it from Japanese colonial rule: Kang 2020.

⁴⁷ Unlike millenarianism, which envisions a thousand-year Kingdom of God on Earth preceding the end of time, premillennialist eschatology holds that this era will only begin after the successive arrivals of the Antichrist and Jesus Christ on Earth. Embracing this worldview, the FTNER Church

Kyubok,⁴⁸ aged 35 and a member of the church, agreed to meet us at a café in Hongdae, a trendy district of Seoul. Despite several attempts to persuade us to join the FTNER Church, Kyubok proved to be a friendly and cheerful person. His conversion to evangelical Protestantism is recent, occurring during a difficult period in his life marked by a desperate search for meaning. Realising the countless sins he had committed, Kyubok was overcome by a visceral fear of being sent to hell. Eager to ease his anxieties, he seriously contemplated suicide before experiencing a divine vision, in which God appeared to him in the form of a magnificent cherry tree, whose blossoms fell generously upon humanity. Whether consciously intended or not, the symbolism of the cherry tree is probably no coincidence. This tree has long held a central place in Buddhism as a symbol of ephemerality and fragility, and from the late nineteenth century onwards, it became the subject of a nationalist appropriation campaign between Korea and Japan. As instruments of Japanese botanical imperialism in colonial Korea (1910–1945), “Japanese cherry trees” (Tokyo Cherry) were widely planted across the peninsula to foster cultural unity within the Empire.⁴⁹ Confronted with the tree during his vision, Kyubok came to understand the true meaning of the Gospel and Christ’s passion – who died on the cross to redeem humanity’s sins: “God gives us endless love and wishes us to be united with him for eternity, as long as we repent of our sins and accept his Truth.”

His conversion profoundly changed his view of society and human behaviour, which he now interprets through a literal reading of the Bible. Previously, Kyubok had not been very involved in politics. He had supported both the impeachment of Ms Park and welcomed the election of the Democrat Mr Moon in 2017. He attributes this “youthful mistake” to the irresistible charm of the Democratic Party candidate and to the pervasive lies spread by South Korean media, which he claims serve China and North Korea. According to him, the Democratic Party of Korea, communism, Catholicism, Buddhism and feminism are evil forces unleashed in Korea to divide and deceive people. Confused by the complexity of the world, people are tempted to embrace the false promises and comfort offered by these seductive but deadly ideologies, none of which are capable of bringing salvation: “It’s like coffee. It tastes good and feels pleasant in your mouth, but it will not save you. By distancing humanity from the knowledge of God, these satanic forces condemn lost souls to a sinful

seeks to validate the prophecy by incorporating conspiracy theories. It claims that the Vatican, Pope Francis, and the Davos World Economic Forum serve the Antichrist, and interprets natural disasters and current conflicts as signs heralding the end times: FTNER 2025a.

⁴⁸ Pseudonym.

⁴⁹ In the 1960s, Park Chung-hee’s regime launched a campaign to promote and plant “Korean cherry trees” (King Cherry) across South Korea as part of a broader decolonisation strategy. These trees eventually assumed a symbolic role in shaping various social identities – including Christian ones: Kuitert 2022: 252–271.

existence devoid of true joy, before damning them to eternal punishment.” Citing the Book of Revelation by John, he insists that Christ’s prophecy is clear: “If you do not repent, your eyes and ears will be blocked. You think you see, but you do not see. You think you hear, but you do not hear.” Living with the certainty that a battle between Good and Evil is raging and that the Apocalypse is imminent, Kyubok’s life is now guided by a single moral imperative: to save as many souls as possible from the Devil by calling them to repent their sins. He carries out this mission with sadness and resignation, lamenting both the ingratitude and ignorance of the people he meets daily.

Jisun,⁵⁰ a friend of Kyubok, is an elegant woman in her forties with a degree in physical education. She now lives in Basel, Switzerland. She was extremely friendly and immediately gave the conversation a proselytising tone: “Since when have you been born again?” she asked us, quickly clarifying her own religious identity. For over an hour, Jisun eloquently and carefully recounted her journey to faith. It was a long process marked by anxiety and constant questioning. Deeply shocked by the horrors and brutal violence afflicting the world, she suddenly felt unable to live an ordinary life without understanding why evil exists. Jisun had an insatiable thirst for Truth. A bright and self-taught person, she delved into most conspiracy theories about satanism, the imminent return of the Nazis, the world government, and Freemasonry. While noticing disturbing coincidences in real life – such as the presence of Masonic symbols in European museums and in Korean Jesuit cemeteries – she learned about satanic cults where followers allegedly sell their souls and kill babies. These shocking discoveries led her to believe that underground, evil forces were causing great disasters and massacres, plunging her into deep anxiety.

As a young adult, Jisun had turned away from Christianity because she found “prophets arrogant and hypocritical”. However, her metaphysical anxieties gradually brought her closer to evangelical Christianity, drawn by its claim to affirm the of the Bible’s truth: “Other Christian churches are hypocrites. Jesus clearly asked adulterers, fornicators and the LGBT community to repent of their sins. But as soon as a pastor has the courage to speak this truth, these so-called churches reject him and call him hateful.” Struggling with doubts, Jisun briefly fluctuated between baptism and total renunciation before a series of miracles led her to fully commit to the faith. After sincerely praying to Jesus Christ, she was healed of COVID, altitude sickness and infertility. In 2021, convinced of God’s existence, Jisun contacted a member of the international evangelical movement *The Last Reformation* (TLR),⁵¹ Mr

⁵⁰ Pseudonym.

⁵¹ *The Last Reformation* (TLR) is a revival movement founded in 2011 by Torben Søndergaard, a charismatic Danish preacher who was imprisoned for embezzlement before being released. Active in the United States and across most of Europe, TLR places central emphasis on water baptism,

Jon Bjarnastein, who baptised her in Nyon, Switzerland. Today, Jisun attends a small revival church, the *New Covenant Fellowship Church* (NCF),⁵² located in Riehen, near Basel.

Jisun and Kyubok's conversion journeys and testimonies exemplify, in a broader sense, South Korea's integration into an extensive transnational network of evangelical doctrines and practices emanating mostly from the United States. Through the circulation of pastors, prospective converts and missionaries,⁵³ the doctrines and methods of North American evangelical churches were progressively embraced by their Korean counterparts starting in the 1990s. As a result of this close relationship, eschatological theologies, Christian Zionism, and the rejection of communism and homosexuality gained significant traction across the peninsula.⁵⁴ It is important to emphasise, however, that these processes of doctrinal alignment are not simply the result of a vertical imposition of foreign norms onto a passive recipient society. Rather, they reflect complex dynamics of acculturation and cultural extraversion⁵⁵ involving active agents – namely Koreans – as evidenced by their capacity to mobilise and blend both global and national references. Among the Protestants we encountered (including Presbyterians), a significant number hold the conviction that Korea – North Korea included – has been divinely elected since its millennial origins. In an approach intertwining religious fundamentalism and Korean nationalism, some Protestant pastors and intellectuals have undertaken ambitious research within Korean historiography, seeking any cultural or mythological element that might prove the presence of fundamental Christian roots in Korea's history.

According to Jisun, God disseminated the Gospel in Korea millennia ago through the birth of Tangun (Image 6), whom she identifies as a prophet of the Lord: "Since that day, the Gospel has been in our roots and in our blood." Popular in certain evangelical circles, this narrative is based on a Christian reinterpretation of the Tangun myth – a figure regarded as the "father of the Korean nation". This foundational myth recounts the tale of a divine prince born in 2333 BCE from the union of

repentance of sins, and the conversion of new members. As part of its expansion strategy, the church makes extensive use of social media, especially Facebook and YouTube: *The Last Reformation 2025*.

52 New Covenant Fellowship 2025.

53 In 2023, South Korea deployed 21,917 missionaries overseas, making it the second-largest missionary-sending country in the world, after the United States: The Korea World Missions Association KWMA 한국세계선교협의회 회 2023.

54 Kang 2020.

55 Developed by Jean-François Bayart, the concept of cultural extraversion challenges the unidirectional vision of modernity, which views it as merely imposed from above onto non-Western societies. Instead, the notion of cultural extraversion emphasises the active role of individuals and their deliberate capacity to mobilise resources derived from their – often unequal – engagement with external environments: Bayart 1999: 98.



Image 6: Portrait of Tangun, by Chae Yong-shin (1850–1945), late Joseon dynasty (1392–1910), exact date unknown. Public domain image.

the heavenly prince Hwanung and a bear-woman, who became human after eating a bundle of mugwort and a handful of garlic cloves before spending 100 days in a dark cave. Tangun, their offspring, is said to have founded the Korean people and the first Korean kingdom – the legendary Gojoseon. As the historian Samuel Guex notes, although this lineage myth is no longer widely accepted as historically factual by contemporary Korean historiography, the existence of Tangun continues to be regarded as a historical reality by much of the population.⁵⁶ Discredited by the

⁵⁶ Guex 2016: 15.

Confucian elites of former dynasties, this folk myth became the basis for a cult⁵⁷ and an ethnoracial history of Korea in the early twentieth century, during a period marked by the rise of nationalist movements. Determined to decentre the peninsula from Chinese and Japanese imperialism, historians Shin Chae-ho and Choe Nam-seon saw in this myth the possibility of writing a history that would confer upon Korea a racial and cultural distinctiveness and superiority over Japan.⁵⁸ In the second half of the twentieth century, the Tangun myth was appropriated by the Korean state to mobilise the population around an ethnonationalist sense of belonging. This myth has divided Protestant circles, some of whom are outraged by its idolatrous character, while others recognise its theological potential as a point of reconciliation between Christian universalism and Korean particularism – all the while upholding Protestant dominance. While certain evangelical groups (to which Jisun and Kyubok belong) have opted to appropriate the myth by christianising Tangun, others remain firmly and vehemently opposed to any public and idolatrous acknowledgement of the deity. Between 1998 and 1999, a controversy arose when evangelical believers vandalised statues of Tangun, which had been erected in 369 Korean public schools by a cultural association aiming to “strengthen Korean national identity”.⁵⁹

Contributing in her own way to the construction of Korea’s divine election theory, Jisun even justifies the nineteenth century massacre of 8,000 Catholics by Confucian rulers⁶⁰ – a purge, she believes, was willed by God to protect Korea from Catholicism and foster “healthy Christianity”, namely Protestantism. She also perceives signs of God’s presence in two iconic Korean works of art, *Arirang* and *Chunyang*, both of which became cultural symbols with strong nationalist connotations during the twentieth century. *Arirang*, a six-hundred-year-old folk song, recounts the difficulties endured by travellers lost in the mountains. For Jisun, however, the meaning of the lyrics is intrinsically biblical and serves to inspire reverent devotion

57 A few thousand followers still worship Tangun today. His cult, known as *Daejonggyo* (the religion of the divine ancestor), is generally classified among Korea’s “indigenous” religions and shares affinities with shamanic practices and folk traditions: Baker 2013.

58 According to Samuel Guex, the myth served to assert the cultural superiority of the Koreans over the Japanese, whose mythical ancestor Jinmu was enthroned only in 660 BCE, that is, 1,673 years after Tangun: Guex 2016: 15.

59 Lee 2009: 66–98.

60 In 1785, only one year after its introduction to the peninsula by Korean scholars, Catholicism was declared heretical and harshly repressed by the Joseon dynasty. The ruling elites viewed the new faith with suspicion: by promoting the equality of all individuals before God and rejecting ancestral rites – the true keystone of Neo-Confucian morality – Catholicism posed a direct challenge to the family order and the system of loyalty upon which their power rested. Between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, thousands of Christians were executed by the royal regime, which discouraged many Koreans from converting and delayed the emergence of a native Catholic clergy: Baker 2013.

to the Divine.⁶¹ While the pansori⁶² *Chunyang* celebrates Confucian virtues of marital fidelity through the hardships of a woman pursued by a powerful magistrate, Jisun interprets the story as a dramatic battle between Good and Evil. The original tale centers on Chunyang, the daughter of a courtesan, who marries Mongryong, the son of a provincial governor. When Mongryong leaves to serve at the royal court in Seoul, his wife vows to remain pure and loyal until his return. Left alone for several years, Chunyang is imprisoned after refusing the advances of Sato, a dignitary, but is ultimately rescued by Mongryong. For Jisun, struck especially by the similarity between the names Sato and Satan, this story serves as a clear metaphor for temptation: “Chunyang, while guarding her purity against Satan, awaits the arrival of God.” For both Kyubok and Jisun, these signs are proof that Korea is destined to become the kingdom of God, heralding a thousand-year era of peace and harmony. Unfortunately, this magnificent divine plan is now being obstructed by the devil, who is determined to manipulate the population by subjecting it to the temptation of communism.

Before the communist government was established in 1948, North Korea was home to numerous active parishes and churches, earning Pyongyang the nickname “Jerusalem of the East”. Following brutal repression and a total ban on religious practice, 234,000 Christians – representing 60 % of Korea’s Protestant population – were forced to flee to South Korea. This mass exodus left a deep-rooted sense of resentment towards communism among those generations.⁶³ During South Korea’s period of industrialisation (1960–1980), certain conservative churches – notably the *Yoido Full Gospel Church* – partly expanded by reframing the rivalry with North Korea in explicitly religious terms. Drawing on the prosperity theology popular in the United States at the time, these churches reframed South Korea’s capitalist success as a sign of divine election, while portraying the communist North as a realm under Satan’s dominion. Material wealth was presented as tangible proof of divine favour and national chosenness.⁶⁴ By applying to the Korean context a Manichaean worldview – in which a kingdom of light stands opposed to a kingdom of darkness – these churches promoted the idea that resisting the North was not merely political, but a spiritual battle against demonic forces. The widespread acceptance of this worldview among

⁶¹ Derived from Old Korean, *Arirang* is commonly interpreted to mean “my beloved.” For Jisun, however, the term takes on a spiritual meaning: she interprets *Arirang* as “With God,” suggesting that “Ar-” refers to *Elohim* (God in Hebrew), while “-irang” aligns with the Korean word for “with”: Fieldnotes 18 December 2024.

⁶² Often described as the Korean counterpart to opera, *pansori* consists of sung narratives accompanied by a drum, portraying historical episodes, popular folktales, or sentimental and moral tragedies.

⁶³ Baker 2013: 15.

⁶⁴ Luca 1999: 104.

conservative Protestants can be attributed, in part, to the privileged status these churches enjoyed during the authoritarian period (1948–1987). Unlike other denominations – which were subjected to surveillance, movement restrictions, and occasional repression – conservative Protestant churches benefited from significantly more favourable conditions for expansion. This advantage was largely due to their ability to gain the favour of authoritarian regimes by actively legitimising their policies.⁶⁵ While the mobilisation of a nationalist narrative infused with anti-communism allowed these evangelical churches to stand out in a competitive religious “market” and to benefit from a controlled autonomy, it is important to note that this formula varied depending on the historical context.⁶⁶ Moreover, the anti-communist stance of conservative churches did not always consist in equating North Korea with demonic forces. As South Korea completed its economic take-off in the late 1980s, such rhetoric gradually lost its appeal, particularly among the emerging urban, educated middle classes.⁶⁷

At the crossroads of these historical and transnational dynamics, Kyubok and Jisun hold a profound hatred of communism, which they view in a demonised and caricatured light. Worried by the almost magnetic appeal this ideology seems to exert

⁶⁵ Mostly composed of Christian personnel, the authoritarian regimes’ governments quickly sought to ensure the loyalty – if not obedience – of religious institutions. Under Chun Doo-hwan’s rule (1980–1987), churches were categorised as either “compliant” or “dissident”, and not all were granted equal opportunities for growth. This uneven treatment partly explains the predominance of conservative tendencies within Korean Protestantism. While liberal churches were subject to strict surveillance and restrictions – such as bans on international travel for their members – those aligned with the regime enjoyed a favourable climate for expansion, both domestically and abroad: Luca 1997: 32–35.

⁶⁶ The *Yoido Full Gospel Church* actively supported the initial inter-Korean rapprochement initiatives launched by the Democratic Party from 1998 onwards, suggesting that theological intransigence mattered less than the benefits of maintaining good relations with ruling governments (Kim 2018: 57–58). Another example is the neo-Pentecostal *Providence Church* – a “modernised adaptation” of the *Full Gospel Church* – which adapted the rhetoric of spiritual conflict with communist North Korea to suit the specific audiences it targeted. Founded in 1980 by Jung Myung-seok (known as JMS), the Church proclaimed that the “better times” once promised by the *Full Gospel Church* in exchange for believers’ efforts had finally arrived. South Korea – represented as Abel, beloved of God – was said to have triumphed economically over North Korea – portrayed as the satanic Cain. Mainly attracting young female university students, the *Providence Church* deployed this Manichean vision to justify one of its central aims: facilitating their integration into socio-professional life (JMS notably taught them how to manage their finances): Luca 1999: 116–117.

⁶⁷ Sociologists Kim Hui-yeon and Nathalie Luca observe that the *Onnuri* Presbyterian megachurch – an “emotionally softened” form of Pentecostalism (from which it has since distanced itself) – has deliberately modeled itself on Western Presbyterian churches to attract upper-class and highly educated congregants. To offer these social elites a “respectable” religious life and identity – one that satisfies their need to distinguish themselves socially and build a good reputation – *Onnuri Church*, for example, refrains from resorting to magical practices derived from shamanism. Consistent with this approach, the Church has also avoided invoking references to a “demonic” North Korea: Kim 2022: 181–182; Luca 1999: 110–113.

on people – whom they regard as blinded by the promise of social equality – they perceive communism as a genuine rival religion, one capable of supplanting Christianity. Kyubok and Jisun look back on past authoritarian leaders with nostalgia, seeing in them protective shields against the communist threat. The evangelical Protestant communities to which they belong vehemently oppose progressive parties, which they perceive as the vanguard of evil forces. While idealising a Christian society grounded in harmony and love, they accuse the left of disseminating appealing falsehoods and manipulating individual emotions to divide society – a pattern they also identify in other developed countries. They abhor LGBT claims, feminism – which they blame for creating division between the sexes – and the arrival of Muslims in the West, viewing these as toxic catalysts for forthcoming conflicts. Without a shadow of doubt, Kyubok and Jisun openly declare their full support for Mr Yoon, whom they portray as a heroic victim of a vast diabolical conspiracy – a perception shaped by the enduring trauma of persecution in North Korea. Before leaving, Jisun warned us: “Be careful, it’s happening in Switzerland as well.”

3.3 Saving the Family from Communism: Meeting with Presbyterians

Hyerin and Minseo

Although they do not adhere to an eschatological or demonic interpretation of the recent political turmoil, Hyerin and Minseo⁶⁸ also oppose Mr Yoon’s impeachment. Cheerful and compassionate women in their thirties living in Seoul, they are deeply committed to their faith. While they occasionally attend services at nearby Presbyterian churches, they prefer to pray with their father, Manshik – a pastor who founded a *house church*⁶⁹ to distance himself from the internal power struggles dividing South Korea’s major religious institutions. Over the past five years, Hyerin

⁶⁸ Pseudonyms.

⁶⁹ The term *house church* is used by the informants themselves to describe their place of worship. Located in Pastor Manshik’s family apartment, the church bears no external markers – such as a cross or signboard – and contains no furniture dedicated to worship, not even a pulpit. Its minimalist, functional, and intimate setting reflects Manshik’s aspiration to return to what he considers the “original” form of Christian religiosity: one lived within a small, loosely hierarchical community. Manshik named his church *The Way*, directly referencing the early Christian congregations described in the Bible. That a Presbyterian pastor would establish a *house church* may seem unexpected, as such structures are more commonly associated with Pentecostal movements – such as the *Yoido Full Gospel Church* – which often use *house churches* as initial outposts in the evangelisation process, particularly in Southeast Asia: Kim 2018: 61–62. *The Way* exemplifies the theological and organisational hybridisations and imitative dynamics at play within South Korean Protestantism.

and Minseo have adopted a more conservative and revisionist outlook, fuelled by their growing disillusionment with what they perceive as the Democratic Party's recent drift towards communism – a shift they believe undermines traditional family values. For years, both women supported the Democratic Party and its egalitarian values, but the coronavirus crisis marked a decisive turning point in their political orientation. Convinced that the virus was no more dangerous than a mild flu, they regarded the lockdown and vaccination measures introduced by Moon's Democratic government as deeply alarming. Like the conservative evangelical groups that rallied in large numbers in 2020 to demand the government's resignation,⁷⁰ Hyerin and Minseo see the ban on religious gatherings as a serious infringement on religious freedom. To them, the declaration of a state of health emergency marked the beginning of a new era of surveillance, control, and state-led disinformation: "It has become like North Korea! Moon Jae-in and Lee Jae-myung are trying to impose communism on us." Like Kyubok and Jisun, the two young women equate communism with state intervention, perceiving in any overly generous or intrusive public policy the seeds of a fatal shift: "The Democrats give aid to young Koreans far too easily, which has made them lazy and unwilling to work. Our country has become like China."

Their distrust of the Democrats deepened after Mr Moon's failed diplomatic initiative with Kim Jong-un, which not only led to heightened border tensions from 2019 but also cast doubt on the Democratic Party's ability to guarantee national security. For the two young women, this loss of trust in political institutions has fuelled growing scepticism towards the Democrats' rhetoric and values. As a sign of their deep distrust, they have gradually distanced themselves from *minjung* historiography taught in public schools since the advent of democracy, which they view as excessively critical of the authoritarian period. They deeply regret that "the history taught in schools overlooks the positive sides of the authoritarian era, like economic growth and social order." As many conservative Koreans do, they were enthusiastic about the film *The Birth of Korea* (2024), which depicts the presidency of Presbyterian leader Syngman Rhee with heroism and pride – while omitting his belligerent tendencies and use of torture to silence political opposition. Flirting with authoritarian nostalgia, they believe that a strong leader who ensures order and security would be the best way to restore stability in South Korea amid political unrest.

Taken together, the various biographical events that have shaped the trajectories of the conservative Protestants we met in Korea echo the discourse of right-wing media. These personal histories are reframed within a broader narrative of betrayal and anti-democratic fraud. Having lost faith in the Democratic Party and

70 Kang 2020.

mainstream media, Hyerin and Minseo are now firmly convinced that Mr Yoon is the target of a left-wing conspiracy. While their personal histories help identify the various circumstances and events that may have led some Koreans to embrace right-wing narratives, their trajectories also serve as a reminder to approach such life paths with caution, avoiding any teleological interpretation. Minseo remains firmly convinced of the president's innocence, while Hyerin admits to feeling overwhelmed by recent events and does not fully support his cause. Sceptical of current narratives, she regularly consults a variety of media sources, including those with a pro-democracy stance. Hence, there is no reason to assume that their commitment to conservatism is either inevitable or irreversible.

Manshik et Juwon

Unlike his daughters, Pastor Manshik and his colleague Juwon,⁷¹ a former tank unit commander, refuse to take a political stance. For them and their friends attending this meeting, something else truly matters. With wisdom, they observe that the unrest surrounding Mr Yoon hinders both discernment and reasoning, since insults and noise coming from across the political spectrum prevent people from seeing things clearly and coherently. Highlighting the need to listen with renewed attention to the voice of God, the only guide to clarity, the two pastors encourage connecting with nature and embracing silence, which they see as essential for experiencing the Truth of the Gospel. Their call to live a calm and contemplative life, detached from political struggles, stands in contrast to the more active and committed approach of other Presbyterians, including Manshik's daughters. Although statistical data are lacking to generalise this hypothesis to all Presbyterians, one might still wonder whether political preferences within this community reflect generational divides. On the one hand, interviews conducted with baby-boomer pastors (born 1955–1963) who lived through the dictatorship suggest that their desire for a religious and conservative societal change is pursued within the democratic system rather than outside it. On the other hand, Protestants from Generation Y (or millennials) (born 1980–1995), who grew up during the early democratic era, tend to favour leadership by a providential figure. Once consistent voters of the Democratic Party, the experiences of these three Protestants illustrate the rise of swing voting among Korean millennials. Disillusioned by corruption scandals on both sides of the political spectrum, around one third of voters from this generation tend to back candidates perceived as “honest” rather than those affiliated to their usual party.⁷²

Although Manshik and Juwon remain explicitly neutral regarding Mr Yoon's martial law, they harbour some distrust towards the Democratic Party. Like many

⁷¹ Pseudonyms.

⁷² Seo 2024.

Protestants, Manshik and his family feel a strong sense of discrimination, believing that the left and atheists in the country are gradually seeking to eradicate them: “People on the left dislike Christianity, so they try to destroy us. Some are extremely cruel and inventive, which is why they target the family.” Sociologically speaking, the close ties between Protestant churches and both authoritarian and conservative regimes have significantly shaped collective perceptions in South Korea. Although Protestant parishes today gather over 8.5 million South Koreans – 17% of the population – they are commonly associated by the broader public with dictatorship, intolerance, nepotism and aggressive proselytising.⁷³ Afflicted by constant criticism, Manshik and his family perceive themselves as a besieged minority – martyred and fundamentally threatened in their faith.

With sincerity and concern, the pastor explains that the left and communism pose an existential threat to society by targeting “the family”, which he regards as its fundamental unit: “The left encourages homosexuality and transgender identity. It teaches this to children from a very young age, and this influences them negatively.” Worried by the sharp decline in birth rates⁷⁴ and the erosion of the “traditional family”, they view non-heteronormative sexuality and extramarital relationships as sins, though ones that can be forgiven. Referring to the biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah, Minseo explained that they do not wish any harm upon homosexuals. She added that she and her family even pray for their salvation. Although they invoke the Bible to justify their opposition to homosexuality, their stance probably mirrors the recent rise of a scapegoat figure in Korean politics: the “left-wing homosexual who supports North Korea”. This theory, which politically and consubstantially links sexual minorities with progressive movements in a defamatory manner, was developed in 2013 by the right-wing and conservative churches.⁷⁵ At that time, they were protesting the Democratic Party’s proposal to introduce a comprehensive anti-

⁷³ In contrast to the Catholic Church – a major site of democratic protest in the late twentieth century – Protestantism cultivated elective affinities with the interventionist, industrial, and repressive agendas of authoritarian governments: Kim 2023.

⁷⁴ Following decades of rapid economic and demographic growth, South Korea is now experiencing a dramatic decline in its birth rate – 0.8 children per woman in 2024, the lowest among OECD countries. Demographic projections suggest the population could decrease from 51 million to 26 million by the end of the century. Despite President Yoon’s declaration of a “demographic state of emergency” and the implementation of pro-natalist policies, these measures face increasing resistance from young South Korean women. Many are choosing to forgo motherhood, marriage, and sexual relationships. While this demographic trend is partly driven by structural factors – including long working hours, solitary lifestyles, and unaffordable housing – it also reflects a “quiet revolution” in response to gender inequality, especially in the workplace, and to enduring Confucian norms. This rejection is further fuelled by widespread sexual violence, such as femicide, deepfake pornography, and the proliferation of hidden cameras in women’s restrooms: Falletti 2024.

⁷⁵ Kang 2020.

discrimination law. This legislative text, presented as a necessary measure to “bring the country in line with global standards,” aimed to ban all forms of social exclusion against religious and sexual minorities in the country. Fearing that the law would open the door to the legalisation of same-sex marriage – which they regard as against divine will and natural law – a coalition of Protestant Churches succeeded in rallying hundreds of thousands of protesters on Sejong Boulevard on 27 October 2024.⁷⁶ While these churches’ stance reflects a certain theological kinship with the US evangelical right – with whom they share “intrinsic logics of faith” – it is also motivated by political considerations specific to Korea, as the anti-discrimination law could potentially undermine their control over admissions to their private educational institutions.⁷⁷

Minho

Met in a tea-room in Sadang, a lively district on the outskirts of Seoul, Pastor Minho⁷⁸ carefully outlines the many shortcomings he perceives among his fellow church members. Somewhat unfriendly, this Calvinist-leaning Presbyterian pastor belongs to a small local church.⁷⁹ During our interview, he revealed that his two principal aims in life are to study the Bible and to evangelise as many people as possible. Convinced that Europe “is sick” because of the conciliatory and inclusive stance adopted by the Reformed parishes, Minho learned French and carried out several conversion missions across France. With pride, he told us that he had participated in the demonstrations against the anti-discrimination law on 27 October 2024: “If same-sex marriage is permitted, it will be like the Flood! Afterwards, serious anti-Christian events will occur, including the ordination of women pastors. Korea will turn into Sodom and Gomorrah.” Regardless of their generation, their support for Mr Yoon, or their belief in conspiracy theories, all our interlocutors criticised “the left” for undermining the foundations of society by promoting homosexuality. Overall, our research highlights a shared conservative understanding of family and sexual norms among Presbyterians and Evangelicals, primarily marked by opposition to non-heterosexual behaviours.

While Minho regards homosexuality as a danger to society, he does not, however, draw a causal link between homoerotic sexual practices and communism. With

⁷⁶ Yoon 2024.

⁷⁷ Initially introduced by President Roh Moo-hyun in 2007, the anti-discrimination bill has faced sustained resistance from the Conservative Party and right-wing Protestant churches, which ultimately led to the text being repeatedly abandoned since 2013. Among the opponents of the bill, non-religious Koreans have criticised the Democratic Party for sanctifying the principle of “political correctness” (PC 주의), which they consider “culturally Western” and likely to restrict the rights of the population’s majority: Asian Boss 2024.

⁷⁸ Pseudonym.

⁷⁹ 서울강남교회 2025.

a leaning towards democratic principles, pastor believes that Mr Yoon's imposition of martial law was based on shady justifications. Denouncing what he saw as an unconstitutional measure and a selfish quest for power, Mr Minho expressed hope that the president would be fully and permanently removed from office in spring 2025. Our conversation with Mr Minho serves as a reminder that, although the Presbyterian landscape exhibits strong elective affinities with the right, it remains internally divided by diverse modes of action and political orientations.⁸⁰ This is evidenced by the emblematic case of the *Korean Christian Presbyterian Church* (PCK), a democratic church supportive of LGBT rights, as well as by the neutrality expressed by the main megachurches regarding Mr Yoon's authoritarian turn. Despite their conservative stance on social and sexual matters, *Onnuri*⁸¹ and *Sarang* refrained



Photo 7: Interior view of the main nave of *Sarang Church* during a sermon, Seoul. © Adrian Gasser, December 2024.

80 This observation equally applies to religious communities with progressive leanings, such as the Catholic Church. During our fieldwork in Seoul, Sister Han Yeo-rim of the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Nevers noted that, although the Catholic Church has officially endorsed the impeachment of President Yoon Seok-yeol, internal divisions persist between progressive clergy and more conservative bishops: Interview 3 January 2025.

81 During Sunday service, Reverend Jung-hyun Oh of *Sarang Church* prayed for peace and stability in Korea, avoiding any explicit political stance or mention of President Yoon. Instead, he attributed the ongoing crisis to what he described as the “emotional” and “impulsive” character of the Korean people – a culturalist interpretation he employed to reaffirm the importance of religion to his congregation. Implicitly, the pastor drew a symbolic boundary between non-Christian Koreans – portrayed as irrational and conflict-prone – and Christians, cast as enlightened and peace-seeking. The case of *Sarang Church* thus illustrates how religion contributes to the construction of identities and social hierarchies – here through the symbolic separation of the faithful, set apart from others by a sense of moral superiority (Fieldnotes 22 December 2024). A video recording of the service is available in Korean on the church’s official YouTube channel : Sarang-ui Gyohoe 사랑의 교회 2024.

from commenting on the political crisis through their communication channels. Limiting their actions to collective prayers for a swift return to stability, they also refrained from officially encouraging their followers to join political demonstrations. While this position might reflect their genuine commitment to democratic principles, the clergy's hesitation also reveals a sense of discomfort – if not apprehension – about alienating polarised segments within their congregations (Photo 7).

4 A Perpetually Divided Peninsula

As in other countries operating under a majoritarian electoral system, such as the United States or the United Kingdom, South Korean political parties tend to perceive politics as a zero-sum game, privileging confrontation over consensus. Amid a constant succession of public scandals and defamation campaigns, political power oscillates between parties in an almost cyclical manner. The Korean Democratic Party fully participates in this recurring cycle. Like their conservatives counterparts, they have been tainted by scandals, including corruption cases reaching the highest echelons of the state. Among the most recent controversies, Lee Jae-myung – who has been elected president in June 2025 – is suspected of involvement in a real estate corruption scandal, a case marked by the troubling suicide of several of his collaborators. It should also be noted that Mr Yoon's election as president in 2022 was largely aided by the Democratic Party's poor image, with many perceiving them as hypocrites hiding behind a façade of virtue. Drawing on similar dynamics to Italy's populist movement *Vaffanculo* (2007) and Brazil's *Lava Jato* operation (2014), Mr Yoon skilfully exploited the misfortunes of a political class widely perceived as corrupt to seize power in 2022. Having built a long career as a public prosecutor, he managed to rally voters by portraying himself as a model of integrity and incorruptibility – an image consolidated through his prominent role in several major anti-corruption trials, including the prosecution of Ms Park in 2016. Mr Yoon's public stature was further enhanced by his controversial dismissal from the Ministry of Justice in 2019, a move that many interpreted as politically motivated. Initially appointed Prosecutor General by President Moon Jae-in, Mr Yoon was abruptly sidelined after pressing charges against Justice Minister Cho Kuk for proven acts of nepotism. The episode dealt a severe blow to the Democratic Party's popularity, which was soon reflected at the ballot box. Three years later, in 2022, Mr Yoon won the presidential election against Lee Jae-myung, only to become entangled himself in a series of scandals – none, however, approaching the gravity of the recent imposition of martial law. With the election of Mr Lee, the vicious cycle of South Korean politics appears to be relentlessly repeating itself, further eroding the trust of an increasingly disillusioned public.

Political misconduct and hypocrisy have real, lasting consequences. A *Pew Research Center* survey revealed that South Koreans' confidence in the functioning of their democracy declined sharply, falling from 53 % in 2019 to just 38 % in 2023.⁸² Since Ms Park's impeachment in 2016, public resentment towards a political elite perceived as "corrupt" and "self-serving" has intensified. South Korea now seems to embody many of the ingredients that have driven the success of populist parties in Italy, Brazil, Argentina and the United States.⁸³ As in these countries, the growing appeal of conspiracy theories and the rejection of elites in South Korea are closely intertwined with tangible material concerns, including a lack of affordable housing, high youth unemployment⁸⁴ and stagnant wages.⁸⁵ Frustrated with political leaders seen as detached from their daily realities, a growing number of South Koreans are expressing a longing for authoritarian restoration, market-driven governance, or even religious revival. Reflecting this trend, by 2023, 35 % expressed support for giving all powers to a strong leader, compared to 23 % in 2017.⁸⁶ If it were to find a unifying and charismatic figure, this resentment towards the elites could serve as a springboard for a new political party built around an anti-establishment agenda. So far, no political party appears to have found the formula to break the Democratic–Conservative duopoly. Initially regarded as a hopeful alternative, the Rebuild Korea Party, established in 2024 by former Justice Minister Cho Kuk, managed to win only twelve of the three hundred seats in Parliament.⁸⁷ Based on the findings from our survey and opinion polls, which reveal the consolidation of both conservative and democratic parties,⁸⁸ Korea appears increasingly divided between two contrasting visions of moral and social order. Unsurprisingly, the early elections of June 2025 didn't alter the prevailing bloc dynamic.⁸⁹ In this context only a

⁸² Wike et al. 2024: 55.

⁸³ Da Empoli 2019.

⁸⁴ Although South Korea's youth unemployment rate declined steadily from a peak of 9.7 % in 2016 to 5.9 % in 2024 (Yoon 2025), it continues to be perceived as a major social concern.

⁸⁵ Rocca 2022.

⁸⁶ Wike et al. 2024: 12.

⁸⁷ Although this relatively modest score enabled the Rebuilding Korea Party to serve as a lever for the democratic opposition, its electoral prospects were likely undermined by the legal controversies and corruption allegations surrounding its leader, Cho Kuk. He was sentenced in December 2024 to two years in prison and six years of electoral ineligibility: Fioretti 2024; The Korea Times 2024a.

⁸⁸ According to the *Korea Times*, both President Yoon and the Conservative Party experienced a rise in approval ratings between 3 December 2024 – the day martial law was imposed – and 3 January 2025, climbing from 30 to 40 % and from 30.6 to 34.4 % respectively. The Democratic Party, by contrast, remained steady at 45 % throughout the same period: Jung 2025.

⁸⁹ On 3 June 2025, Mr Lee won the election with 49.42 % of the vote. This result highlighted the substantial support still enjoyed by the Conservative Party, despite the authoritarian drift of its former president. Indeed, Kim Moon-soo's score – 41.15 % – was relatively high given the

combination of structural reforms – including introducing proportional representation, addressing socio-economic inequalities, and fostering a historical narrative focused on reconciliation – could help bridge a divide that continues to deepen.⁹⁰

Recently, a fresh wind has been blowing through conservative circles. Alongside the older, grey-haired workers, groups of young, university-educated conservative believers have emerged. Often disillusioned with the Democratic Party and progressive stances – particularly on issues of *political correctness*⁹¹ – they are carving out their own ideological space within the right. When the Democrats returned to power in 2017, their emphasis on “social justice” and the protection of minorities raised alarm on the right, which has traditionally prioritised the preservation of individual freedoms. These policies also provoked indignation among Protestant communities, determined to defend a “natural” social order aligned with divine will. Echoing the mobilisation against “wokeness” seen in conservative Anglo-Saxon Protestant churches, Korean Presbyterians and Evangelicals alike

circumstances. Far from fading, conservative adherence appears to be undergoing a process of reconfiguration, notably along gender lines. A clear sign of this shift was the performance of the young conservative Lee Jun-seok, who managed to secure 8.34 % of the vote, especially among young South Korean men: Hwang Joo-young 2025.

90 Significant efforts are currently underway to construct a shared, cross-partisan, and reconciliatory historical narrative that acknowledges the multiple dimensions of Korea’s past. As in other countries marked by dictatorial legacies, such as Chile and Peru, South Korea established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2005. Initiated under President Roh Moo-hyun, the commission has been investigating atrocities and massacres committed between the beginning of Japanese colonisation and the end of the dictatorship period (1910–1993). It is currently processing over 20,000 unresolved cases of violence, with the aim of “reducing divisions related to the past in order to advance towards unity”: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Korea 2025.

91 These tendencies are neither unique to Korea nor to the religious sphere. It is also observable across Western societies and within the political arenas of both the radical left and nationalist-populist movements. While Western faculties of social and political sciences have produced extensive research on the “rightward shift of the right” and conservative revolutions worldwide, little attention has been paid to the fundamentalist tendencies emerging within progressive movements. Calling for a sociological analysis of *wokeness* – a term referring to those politically engaged with systemic social inequalities – Ian Buruma and Olivier Moos argue that this trend is potentially anti-liberal, puritanical, and even fundamentalist. Grounded in non-negotiable convictions – such as the existence of “patriarchal dominance” and “systemic racism” – *wokeness* seeks a profound transformation of social and political structures, positioning itself in direct opposition to conservative values. In this respect, *wokeness* is believed to play a central role in the polarisation of contemporary societies: Buruma 2023; Moos et al. 2024: 18–25.

appear to view themselves as engaged in a “culture war” against progressive movements. The rise of the “communist homosexual” as a common enemy in 2017 – the result of intertwining what the political right and conservative Churches saw as the two main threats, namely the “red scare” and the “purple scare” – served to cement their electoral alliance.⁹² When martial law was imposed on 3 December 2024, one might have anticipated a collapse of the right and a surge of support for the Democratic Party, echoing the aftermath of Ms Park’s impeachment. However, based on our research, it is evident that no such shift is taking place – apart from the Democrats’ victory in the early elections held in June 2025, which turned out to be less decisive than anticipated. Evidence that conservative groups have learned from their 2016 defeat lies in the way their electoral support has since coalesced around a social and religious core belief deemed non-negotiable: the defence of the traditional family. Protestant groups did not unanimously rally behind Mr Yoon, likely highlighting the limits of overreliance on conspiracy theories in a highly educated society.⁹³ Nonetheless, our survey results suggest that most of these groups, albeit with certain reservations, continue to broadly support the Conservative Party. Confronted with a world they see as increasingly complex, absurd, and conflictual, the Protestants we met responded to their sense of disorientation by seeking new meaning and redefining their values. Demonstrating both agency and embeddedness within a pluralistic society, they navigated the political crisis by mobilising a diverse array of collective references – including theology, conspiracy theories, nationalist narratives, and traditional culture – through which they crafted new ways of inhabiting the world, with tangible political implications. Although South Korea narrowly avoided a return to authoritarianism, it now appears to be plunging into a cultural war whose outcome remains uncertain.

⁹² Political scientist Jean-François Bayart argues that religion and politics are not inherently incompatible. Rather, the two spheres often overlap, intertwine, and co-evolve according to concrete historical contexts. While not entirely indistinguishable – each being shaped by its own transcendence and irreducible internal logics, such as the belief in God – they nonetheless influence and shape one another. Drawing on a wide range of empirical examples, Bayart contends that religion is not external to politics. On the contrary, it forms an organic and intimate part of politicisation processes, including nation-state formation. For him, this relationship is not unidirectional, as the development of a differentiated political sphere has likewise fostered the emergence of an autonomous religious domain: Zambiras, Ariane / Bayart, Jean-François (eds.) 2015: 155–168.

⁹³ Between 1990 and 2008, South Korea experienced a genuine “education fever.” During this period, the proportion of young South Koreans entering higher education rose from 30 % to 80 % – one of the highest figures across OECD member states: Guex 2015: 241.

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