On December 3, 2024, President Yoon Suk Yeol declared emergency martial law in South Korea. At the time, I didn't fully understand what that meant. As a teenager more preoccupied with photography than with current political chaos, martial law felt distant, like something confined to history books: an echo of Chun Doo-hwan's military dictatorship in the 1980s, when martial law was used to suppress pro-democracy movements like the Gwangju Uprising. Since then, martial law has been the spectre of military dictatorship that haunted Koreans' political memories. Within hours, Yoon's declaration ignited outrage among the public. Both progressives and conservatives accused him of usurping power and undermining democracy. Twitter and Instagram Stories exploded with demands for impeachment. By the next morning, protests had erupted across the country, with Yoon's residence at Hannam-dong becoming one of the most visible epicenters of this discourse. Of course, Yoon had his supporters who barricaded the entrance, preventing protesters from approaching. But that day, the rally for and against impeaching President Yoon in Hannam-dong told a different story: a husk of democracy devoid of civility. It was a demonstration of how formulated claims engulf public discourse, pushing people away from the exercise of democratic citizenship.

On one side of Hannam Elementary School stood the progressives who vocally demanded impeachment, raising signs that accused President Yoon for staging a veritable coup. On the other side, conservatives gathered to chant against election fraud and the supposed presence of Chinese spies in South Korea. The cacophony of ideological dissonance created a discord that only elevated the tension between the two starkly different groups. To an outsider, this looked like democracy in motion as citizens exercised their beliefs, and the freedom to protest**.** After all, the right to express one's ideas was being exercised without any physical violence, a paragon of peaceful protest. But, to me, it felt like something far more fragile—a struggle not for fine-tuning the difference, but for effacing other's voices. I didn't go to Hannam-dong to choose a side. I went to take photographs with the thrills of capturing a historical moment through my

own lens. My camera served as a way to observe the site without becoming entangled in ideological clashes. But the protests had a way of pulling bystanders in; an elderly woman at the entrance of the conservative rally stopped me.

“Student, are you one of us? A conservative?” she asked with suspicion.

I stammered, unsure how to answer. “Uh… yeah, I guess... I am?”

“Then prove it. Say myeolgong—‘eradicate communism!’” she demanded, invoking a Cold War-era slogan tied to South Korea’s long-standing tension with North Korea and fears of communist influence.

My mouth resisted saying the word, but I said it anyway. It wasn’t enough. “Then say, ‘Arrest Lee Jae-myung!’” she demanded.

“...Arrest Lee Jae-myung.” Those words didn’t feel like mine. As I spoke, a wave of shame washed over me—an inexplicable guilt that reminded me of stories about Koreans forced to adopt Japanese names during the colonial era out of fear. For a moment, I imagined myself betraying something larger than a political view, my own sense of self. Satisfied, the old lady finally let me in, handing me a sign written in Korean: *“Stop the Steal”* on one side and *“Arrest Lee Jae-myung”* on the other. “Carry this,” she said. “It’s your talisman now.”

Inside, the crowd was unified in purpose. I felt both awe and unease. As someone who found a positive perspective toward the prominent leader of the progressive party Lee Jae-myung, I felt like a spy, a heretic mole amidst zealots. My heart raced as I imagined the consequences of being discovered. Would they see me as a traitor, a foreign agent, a symbol of everything they feared? At the center of the protest, a man in his fifties stood on the back of a white truck, gripping a microphone like a preacher delivering a sermon.

“The reason the 70s and 80s generation could enjoy warm clothes and abundant food is not because they worked so hard. It’s because of the sacrifices of today’s youth—the 20s and 30s—who toil endlessly for this nation!” he declared, tears streaming down his face. The crowd erupted into cheers, their signs raised like shields in battle. ‘What an irony, I thought.’ That was my first time the older generation credited the youth by making a blatantly anachronistic claim.

“To protect our liberal democracy,” he continued, voice cracking, “I’ve fought with my family and friends, even to the point of losing some of them. ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’ But at least we, the ones who know the ‘truth’, must fight for South Korea. Otherwise, this nation will fall to Chinese bastards. Isn’t this right?”

I took my photos mechanically, but something gnawed at me. How could the crowd believe this? How could they claim the sacrifices of the past as debts owed to the present? Their conviction felt less like a fight for truth and more like a fight to preserve a narrative—one that demanded loyalty over logic, faith over fact. To see how other speakers were fabricating a narrative, I moved to a larger conservative rally. This one was more organized. Volunteers handed out free odengtang, a heaty fish cake soup to warm the protesters. There was no violence, only passion and voices raised in defiance. A young woman, seemingly in her twenties, took the microphone on another truck, calling for “liberal democracy”. She stumbled over her words but pressed on, repeating the same statement: “We must fight for our liberal democracy. We must not let the progressives hand over our country to the Chinese communists!”

I watched the crowd, and their fervor strengthened with each cycle of speeches. The logic of their arguments had long ceased to matter; what fueled them now was something more primal. A collective faith that their cause, their frame of truth, was the only hope for the nation. At that moment, I realized this wasn’t about martial law anymore. What had started with Yoon’s decree had grown into something far greater: an ideological crusade framed as a battle for the future of

this country. It wasn't reason versus reason, but belief versus belief, passion against passion. I wondered: could either of these opposing factions claim to be entirely correct? In life, the truth rarely lies at the extremes. It is often found somewhere in between—like the compromise between democracy and socialism, neither of which, in their purest forms, serves as a perfect political system. It is the middle ground, the messy overlap, that tends to function most effectively.

Overall, I felt isolated from those protestors who surely believe their ideology is absolute. To firmly believe in something implies a sense of justification that matches one's conviction. Yet, that justification wasn't immediately apparent on the surface, at least to me during the rally. The chants of "myeolgong" and "impeach the dictator" echoed not stemming from martial law declaration but from affective polarization. It was a fundamental breakdown in the ability to engage with one another as citizens. This wasn't democracy as I had imagined it as a system centered around compromise, albeit slow and cumbersome. Instead, it was democracy eroded by the absence of civility. The lack of civility unfolded from the rally in Hannam-dong not only told me the extent to which those two parties are divided, but also a broader pattern in which polarization and partisanship eroded true democracy.

The protests in Hannam-dong forced me to confront the fractured reality of my country. Just as the progressives and conservatives stood on opposite sides of the protest, Korea itself was split—an unconscious collectivism masked the sharp edges of internal division: a schism between parties, east and west, cities and countryside, and between genders. According to a survey by Embrain Public, the ideological rift was undeniable, particularly among young men and women. Among men in their 20s and 30s, 40.5% supported the conservative People Power Party, while only 10% favored the progressive Democratic Party. Meanwhile, women in the same age group leaned the other way, with 28.3% supporting the Democratic Party and only 11.4% backing the conservatives. The numbers didn't just tell a story of political preference; they

revealed a profound gender divide, running deep into the fabric of how we saw ourselves as a nation. This wasn't new. The rise of radical feminist movements like Megalia— an feminist online community that used satirical "mirroring" of systemic misogyny. The discourse over gender has plagued South Korea. It had already exposed publicly unspoken tensions between men and women. As women demanded equality in spaces once dominated by men, resentment brewed. This gave rise to what many now call "Korean feminism," a movement shaped by tragedies like the 2016 Gangnam Station Post-it Note protest, where women mourned the murder of a young woman in a hate crime, and scandals like the Nth Room case, a horrific online sexual exploitation scheme targeting women and minors. The fight against deeply rooted gender inequality only furthered internal schism, eradicating the willingness to discuss the topic. These moments demanded accountability, but they also deepened the rift. In a similar manner, President Yoon's promise to abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family only widened the divide. For men, it felt like a long-awaited validation of their grievances accumulated over the past 10 years. For women, it was a betrayal, a sign that their fight for equality was far from over. This gendered conflict spilled over into broader ideological battles, amplifying the polarization that now defines Korean politics. Ultimately, Korea's societal divisions go far beyond gender or generational conflicts—they serve as the foundation for deeper ideological divides. Political framing strategies, magnified by social media and partisan rhetoric, have entrenched extremism on both sides, eroding the principles of compromise and dialogue that democracy relies on. Korea's democracy now stands precariously incomplete.

After The Gwangju Uprising, a 1980 pro-democracy movement brutally suppressed by the military, Korea quickly adopted the institutional framework of a democratic society. While critics point to its imperfections, many agree that the structural foundations are sound. The real issue may not lie in its institutions but in its culture. Western democracies evolved over centuries, through conflict and struggle, giving rise to a democratic ethos before democratic systems were

fully established. In contrast, Korea's democracy was introduced abruptly after its independence from Japan in August 1945, its institutions transplanted rather than organically grown. The result feels like wearing an ill-fitting garment—democracy as an imported idea, not yet fully internalized. The Hannam-dong protests, triggered by Yoon's declaration of martial law, laid bare these cracks in Korea's democracy. But more than the institutions themselves, the heart of the problem lies with the citizens. Apparent problem lies in the tendency of people to be easily swayed by political framing. Not to mention people's lack of attention in dissecting and analyzing the problem. Their immaturity, or apathy, is what hinders Korea's democracy from reaching its full potential. To strengthen Korea's democracy, it is not the institutional framework that needs the most urgent review, but the growth and maturity of its citizens. Without this, the divisions will only deepen, and democracy will remain fragile, a surface-level ideal with nothing solid beneath. Ultimately, democracy, at its core, depends on its citizens – not only their participation but also their ability to critically engage, compromise, and foster dialogue.

A citizen is not merely someone who exercises individual rights but someone who transcends selfish interests to orient their loyalty toward others—not as subjects of an abstract state, but as members of a shared community. True citizenship requires civility, a civic virtue that enables individuals to act together under a shared understanding of the common good. And what is a citizen, really? A citizen is not simply a bearer of rights but someone who engages in dialogue, who deliberates and acts with others toward collective goals. Citizenship emerges not from isolation but from participation in this shared pursuit of the common good. At the Hannam-dong protests, I witnessed neither progressives nor conservatives embodying this ideal. Both sides seemed more invested in fighting over who was right than in asking the more crucial question: *What should we as citizens do to address the problem?* Their refusal to listen to one another, their reliance on hostile emotions, turned the protests into a spectacle of opposition rather than dialogue. Outwardly, their banners and chants claimed to defend Korea's liberal democracy. But

beneath this façade, their actions revealed a more self-serving motive: the need to assert their political identities as superior. Conservatives rallied to defend Korea from what they saw as the creeping influence of Chinese communism, which, they argued, had infiltrated the Democratic Party and was spreading through education, media, and journalism. They vowed to protect “liberal democracy” from this supposed enemy. Progressives, on the other hand, accused President Yoon of undermining democracy through constitutional violations and abuses of power. They called him a tyrant, a usurper of democratic principles. Both sides claimed to act in the nation's best interest, yet their behavior revealed little willingness to cooperate or compromise. Instead of pursuing the common good, they were forcing their political ideologies onto one another, each faction locked in a battle to declare their side as the ultimate truth.

Democracy exists to harmonize diverse opinions and achieve social consensus, yet what I saw in Hannam-dong was its failure. The protests became an arena of mutual antagonism. Among the progressives, there were instances of physical confrontations with police and verbal attacks targeted at anti-feminist or anti-LGBTQIA+ groups. Conservatives, for their part, framed their opponents not as fellow citizens but as ‘anti-national forces’. Both sides clung to their beliefs as if they were absolute truths, excluding the possibility of coexistence. What unfolded was not collective action for the common good but a deeply individualistic pursuit of identity, one that strengthened itself by rejecting the other. In the end, the root of the uncanniness I felt in the Hannam-dong protests came from the contradiction they exposed. It was not from the chaos of the protests themselves but from the dissonance between the outward performance of citizenship and the inward prioritization of personal ideology. Beneath the surface of collective chants and shared slogans, the protests were something far more self-serving: a struggle not for the nation, but for the validation of individual beliefs. To summarize, the Hannam-doing protests revealed Korea’s facture by ideology, where democracy serves not as a tool for conflict management and coordination, but as a weapon for division. Both sides claimed to defend

Korea’s future, yet their actions betrayed a deeper truth. This is not a fight for the common good but a battle to assert individual beliefs as absolute. If Korea’s democracy is to survive, it cannot rely on institutions alone. It must cultivate the understanding of citizens that democracy comes from those who have citizenship and perform civility. It is not about proving who is right, but about asking what we can do together. Until we learn this, democracy in Korea will remain fragile—visible, but hollow.