

# South Korean opposition leader recovering from surgery after being stabbed in the neck

By [Gawon Bae](#), [Yoonjung Seo](#) and [Nectar Gan](#), CNN

Updated 7:16 AM EST, Tue January 2, 2024

South Korea's main opposition party leader Lee Jae-myung is recovering from surgery after being stabbed in the neck during a visit to the southern city of Busan on Tuesday.

Lee underwent a vein reconstruction surgery and is recovering in the intensive care unit, Democratic Party spokesperson Kwon Chil-seung said.

Lee was touring the construction site of the Gadeokdo New Airport and talking to reporters when he was attacked, leaving the politician with a 1-centimeter laceration on the left side of his neck, Kwon said in an earlier statement.

Lee suffered "suspected damage to his jugular vein" and doctors were concerned he may have additional bleeding, Kwon said, citing doctors.

Kwon described the attempt on Lee's life an act of "terrorism" and "a serious threat to democracy."

Earlier in the day Democratic Party's floor leader Hong Ik-pyo said Lee was "in a conscious state" in hospital.

The assailant, who was arrested at the scene, is a man in his sixties, according to Busan police. He approached Lee for an autograph before carrying out the attack with an 18 cm (7 inch) long knife purchased online, the police said in a briefing.

Footage of the brazen attack, captured on live television at the press conference, showed an unidentified man at the front of the crowd suddenly lunging at Lee and striking him in the neck, sending Lee collapsing backwards.

The attacker was then wrestled to the ground and restrained by several people.

Photos showed Lee lying on the floor with his eyes shut and a handkerchief pressed against his neck. Small amounts of blood were visible in some of the photos.

South Korea's President Yoon Suk Yeol expressed "deep concern" for Lee's safety after the attack, according to the presidential office.

Yoon emphasized such violence "should not be tolerated under any circumstances" and ordered the police to swiftly investigate, the office said.

Democratic Party floor leader Hong called for party members to remain calm and refrain from making political interpretations of the incident.

Outside the Seoul National University Hospital, a small crowd gathered amid heavy police presence on Tuesday afternoon as the ambulance carrying Lee arrived. One supporter shouted: "Lee Jae-myung, be strong!"

In a statement, South Korea's national police agency pledged to strengthen personal protection for "key personnel" to prevent similar cases from happening.

South Korea's politics have been riven by deep polarization between conservative and liberal sides, particularly in recent years which saw former President Park Geun-hye jailed on abuse of power and bribery charges before being pardoned and released in 2021.

Lee, 59, a liberal former provincial governor, narrowly lost to Yoon of the conservative People Power Party in the presidential election in March 2022.

Lee became the leader of the Democratic Party five months later and has been gearing up his party for the parliamentary elections in April.

South Korea has witnessed high-profile incidents of political violence in the past.

Lee's predecessor in the Democratic Party, Song Young-gil, was attacked in the head with a hammer by a man during a campaign event for Lee's presidential bid in 2022.

Park, the former President, was attacked with a knife at a party rally in Seoul in 2006 when she served as the chairwoman of the country's main opposition party at the time, the Grand National Party. She suffered a four-inch cut on her face that required 60 stitches and prevented her from talking normally for weeks.

And in 2015, Mark Lippert, then US ambassador to South Korea, was stabbed in the face by an assailant at a political event he was set to speak at. The ambassador suffered a 4-inch gash from his right cheekbone to his lower jaw that required 80 stitches. His assailant was later sentenced to 12-years in jail.