
Advancing Human Rights and the Prospect for Democracy in North Korea

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This article is based on an address delivered in South Korea on February 16 at a gathering organized by the Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights.

When North Korea is discussed in policy circles or in the media in the United States, it is almost exclusively in terms of the security challenges posed by North Korea's nuclear weapons program and the country's provocative international behavior. There is little awareness of the extent to which the North Korean totalitarian system is steadily eroding, opening possibilities that did not exist until very recently for internal political and economic change and the eventual reunification of the Korean peninsula. Understanding the new conditions in North Korea and how they came about is essential for dealing with the many security, humanitarian, human rights, and other challenges emanating from this remote and despotic country. The experience of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and its NGO partners in South Korea offers a prism through which the evolution of North Korea can be perceived and comprehended.

In 2003, a South Korean NGO called the Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights held its 4th annual International Conference in Prague. In his closing speech, Reverend Benjamin H. Yoon (Yoon Hyun,

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as he is known in South Korea), the Citizens' Alliance Chairman, told the Prague conference of the saying in the Orient that the hardest part of setting a vast plain on fire was lighting the first spark, after which the plain would burn fiercely. "What I have been able to do," he said, "was to light one match to that vast plain. Now, I have no doubt that those flames will spread widely across the world."

I can speak from personal experience in saying that in the case of NED, this is exactly what happened. In 1996, when Rev. Yoon founded the Citizens' Alliance, NED was like a stretch of very combustible dry land on that vast plain, ready to be ignited but lacking a spark. Two members of the NED Board had been insisting for years that we find a way to get involved in North Korea. One of them was Dr. Fred Ikle, a former under secretary of defense in the Reagan administration and one of America's leading strategic thinkers. The other was Stephen Solarz, a former Democratic congressman who had made several visits to North Korea to meet with Kim Il-sung and who was also Kim Dae-jung's best friend and most fervent supporter in the U.S. Congress. Both of them passed away recently and are fondly remembered by Americans of both of our political parties.

In response to this Board pressure, we were looking for a way to get started on North Korea. But since NED is a grant-making institution, and since we couldn't find a group working on this issue that could carry out a good project, we were stymied. Then one day our senior program officer for Asia, Louisa Greve, called to my attention an article from a Citizens' Alliance publication that had just arrived called "Life and Human Rights in North Korea." All of a sudden we had a potential grantee, a place to begin, and before long we were talking with Rev. Yoon about a project that became the first International Conference on North Korean Human Rights and Refugees. We were on our way, spreading the fire on that vast plain.

I attended that first conference, where I gave a talk called "Ending the Silence." I said that there were three reasons for the silence: the closed nature of the North Korean system, which made it hard for human rights groups to gather and verify information about human rights abuses; the fear some had that raising the issue would provoke conflict with North Korea; and finally the difficulty of separating the issue of human rights from what I called "the complex politics of the divided peninsula."

At the time I was not that familiar with these complexities. But as I became more involved with the issue, I realized something that seemed paradoxical: some of the people who had fought hardest for human rights and democracy in South Korea did not want to align themselves with the cause of human rights in North Korea. The reason for this, I was told, was

not just that they saw focusing on human rights as an obstacle to engagement and reconciliation with the North. They also associated the issue of human rights in North Korea with support for the former military dictatorship, which they felt had used the threat from the North and the totalitarian nature of the system there to justify its authoritarian rule.

The unfortunate legacy of the period of military rule in South Korea reminds me of a parallel political division that we had in the United States during the Cold War. Back then, the United States faced the moral dilemma that some of its allies against the Soviet Union were authoritarian governments. This was often called the problem of “friendly tyrants,” and it led to very heated debates about our foreign policy. When the Carter administration came into office in 1977, it took the view that the United States had to pressure such governments on human rights much more strongly than it had done before. But the fall of the Shah in Iran and Somoza in Nicaragua in 1979, and their replacement by regimes that were hostile to the United States as well as to democracy, led to a sharp counter-attack by conservatives who argued that authoritarian allies were both less repressive and friendlier to the United States than the likely totalitarian alternatives and should not, therefore, be abandoned.

NED came into existence when this debate was at its height and our experience in dealing with the issue is instructive. We accepted the distinction that conservatives had drawn between authoritarian and totalitarian systems because it was real and obvious. As repressive as authoritarian systems were, they still had a level of pluralism in civil society and an economy that was greater than in closed communist systems. Instead of using this distinction to rationalize authoritarian repression—which, fairly or unfairly, some critics felt the United States had done with respect to “friendly tyrants”—we said that our goal would be to advance democracy differently in each case. In authoritarian systems, where there was restricted but not negligible political space, our goal would be to expand that space and promote a political transition. In totalitarian systems, it would be to try to open a closed society.

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In other words, working for democracy in both authoritarian and totalitarian countries was a point of consensus around which we could

build support for NED's mission. It helped, of course, that what Professor Samuel Huntington would later call "the third wave of democratization" was beginning to crest at the very moment NED was getting started. With transitions occurring in country after country, democracy was suddenly a realistic option, an objective that people could unite behind, as opposed to fighting over whether or not to support the lesser of two evils. As the spread of democracy swept away scores of dictatorships, it also healed some of the political divisions of the Cold War era.

Regrettably, though, the division did not disappear on the Korean peninsula. It grew even wider as South Korea achieved a momentous democratic breakthrough from military rule, while North Korea sank ever more deeply into a dark night of totalitarian oppression, political isolation, and even calamitous famine and loss of life.

North Korea remains an immensely complicated political and security problem for South Korea and some believe that focusing on human rights abuses will only make it more difficult to achieve peace and reconciliation. But this view is very short sighted. In the end, real peace and genuine people-to-people dialogue and exchange can only happen when the wall of totalitarianism is removed. And the starting point for removing this wall is defending North Korean human rights.

Let me make clear that NED is not, strictly speaking, a human rights organization. Its mission is to provide assistance to people who are trying to build a democratic society and political system. But we have always taken the view that a strategy to advance democracy in a totalitarian country must begin with support for human rights and the free flow of information. These are the logical and necessary first steps of a democracy strategy, and they will eventually lead to other steps as political space opens up and the isolation of the society begins to break down. Moreover, such steps need not complicate or conflict with diplomatic or security concerns if they are pursued through nongovernmental organizations and on a separate track from official government policy.

Since NED started working on North Korea more than a decade ago, there have been changes of great importance. North Korea remains a totalitarian country, but human rights organizations now routinely address the issue, as does the United Nations, which has established the position of special rapporteur for North Korean human rights. The people of North Korea are also less isolated today than they once were. There are now more than 23,000 defectors from North Korea, and they bring with them not just first-hand information about the country but also the desire to reach back and connect with the people they have left behind. There is also significant

traffic across the border with China, which increases the porousness of North Korea and allows information to spread about the remarkable development China has achieved after discarding its Maoist ideological baggage. In addition, short-wave radio stations broadcast into North Korea, and groups like DailyNK gather real news from sources inside the country, where websites and journals have begun to emerge. The fact that there are now one million cell phones in North Korea is a statistic of stunning significance.

In short, new opportunities are developing as a result of more than a decade of change and hard work by NGOs, many of which are NED grantees. Such groups inform the international community about what is going on in North Korea, reach the people there directly with news and information, and build the capacity of North Koreans both in the country and in South Korea to enlarge the very small areas of independent political and economic space that now exist.

It is possible that these opportunities may grow as a consequence of a precipitous and seemingly artificial leadership transition in North Korea that has resulted in the installation of a twenty-eight-year-old “Supreme Leader” whom nobody had heard of just two years ago. There is some anecdotal evidence that popular discontent is growing—a crackdown on cell phone use, for example, or a series of executions and unexplained deaths, including the murder of four public officials in North Hamgyung Province, with a note reading “punished in the name of the people” found next to one of the bodies. We do not and should not pretend to know the popular mood, since this cannot be accurately discerned. But it is not unreasonable to assume that the regime is feeling insecure, that it knows it has a severe legitimacy crisis, and that the appearance of stability is misleading. Despite all the uncertainty of this moment, I believe that it is now more important than ever for us to think about ways to expand support for an emerging civil society in North Korea.

There are seven areas where such support is needed. First, it is important to continue advocacy in defense of the fundamental human rights of the people of North Korea. Despite the changes that have taken place in North Korea in recent years, the human rights situation has not improved. These changes amount to an erosion of the totalitarian system, not to its reform, and that system is still the most oppressive in the whole world. It remains a priority to document and expose the terrible abuses that take place every day in North Korea and to end the scandal of China forcibly sending refugees back to North Korea where they face prison, starvation, torture, and execution. A special priority should be to shut down the system of political prison camps, the existence of which constitute a crime against humanity.

Second, it is necessary to continue to break down the information blockade by expanding short-wave radio broadcasts into North Korea and securing transmission facilities in nearby countries that will make possible more easily accessed medium-wave programs. In addition, a number of groups are looking at developing more sophisticated methods of spreading information inside the country through cell phone messaging systems and

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making Korean-language Wikipedia available on CDs, USB flash drives, and MP4 players. While no one is predicting an Arab Spring uprising in North Korea anytime soon, the growing presence of these data storage and messaging devices is raising the consciousness of people at the grassroots level, thereby creating new possibilities for political networking.

The opportunity for such interaction is also increased by the rapid development of informal markets called *jangmadang* that have proliferated in North Korea as a result of the breakdown of the public distribution system. A study of the some fifty *jangmadang* conducted by NKNet and the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE) shows them to be much more sophisticated than informal farmers markets. Some of the markets have as many as 100,000 daily visitors, and there is an informal banking system as well as trading in land-use rights. Even more important, these markets exist as zones of autonomy where people meet and exchange information, something that was never possible before. In their study *Witness to Transformation: Refugee Insights into North Korea*, Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland write that participation in these markets is an “everyday form of resistance” that is associated with the following characteristics: “greater likelihood of arrest, more consumption of foreign news, more negative assessments of the regime, a greater willingness to communicate those views to one’s peers, and a greater propensity to cite political motives for emigration.”¹ Among the possible new initiatives that support groups are now developing is one that would encourage the spread of these markets to parts of North Korea where they don’t now exist; another would ensure the circulation inside the *jangmadang* of quality information about both market transactions and the outside world.

A fourth area of work is setting up programs just across the border in China that offer training in free market economies, human rights, and democracy. The participants in these programs are mostly North Koreans who visit China regularly to pursue business opportunities. Most are university-educated and have respectable jobs in North Korea. The fact that they so readily take part in these programs may be explained by their familiarity with outside information, which more and more North Koreans are receiving from satellite television, radio, or relatives in South Korea. One of the programs has four levels of curricula—the current situation, Korean history, basic concepts of human rights, and globalization—and participants eagerly return to take the next level. Some who have completed the program become trainers themselves in China so that they can gain the experience needed to carry out such trainings inside North Korea.

Other North Koreans whom some NGOs are trying to reach are overseas workers, who are sent abroad to obtain capital for the destitute North Korean government. This is a fifth area of work that has great promise. The number of overseas laborers is now about 30,000, but it is expected to rise to 100,000 within the next two years. Most are in Siberia, but there are also North Korean workers in China, the Middle East, and Africa. They work as bonded laborers, with the North Korean government confiscating most of their salary. Human rights groups will try to interview some of these workers and provide the information they obtain on labor conditions, the confiscation of wages, and worker rights violations to the International Labor Organization and groups like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. Such a program could set the stage for a related labor initiative to apply international standards of workers' rights to multinational companies that invest in North Korea, or to the Kaesong Industrial Complex (a collaborative economic development project opened in December 2004 on the North Korean side of the Demilitarized Zone where 123 South Korean firms manage enterprises that employ more than 50,000 North Korean workers).

The final two areas of work are ones that are taking place in South Korea. The first is the great importance of assisting the defector community, which—as previously mentioned—has now grown to more than 23,000 people. The defectors serve three vital purposes. The first is that they can inform South Korea and the world about conditions and attitudes in North Korea. The second is that they can connect with people in North Korea through radio broadcasts and through the various training and information initiatives that have been discussed. Finally, they represent a potential cadre of skilled professionals who are schooled in the South, familiar with

how a modern political and economic system functions, and motivated to liberate and rebuild their homeland. When North Korea opens up—and it will—they could become a key part of a Korean volunteer service corps that will help North Koreans rebuild their society after generations of totalitarian isolation.

Finally, there is the need to strengthen the links between North Korean defectors and South Korean activists by supporting their efforts to work together to build a unified and democratic Korea. An example of this is a program now being carried out by the Center for Korean Women and Politics, a group committed to strengthening the participation of women in South Korean local and national governance. They are bringing together female defectors with South Korean women to exchange views, break down the stereotypes that North and South Koreans have about each other, and think together about how North Korea can democratize. They are building the kind of trust, mutual understanding, and respect that will be needed to make unification real and human.

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occurred in East Asia over the past quarter century have been historic: from the democratic revolutions that took place in South Korea and in the Philippines, to the unheralded triumph of democracy in Mongolia and the transition in Taiwan, to the stunning democratic success in Indonesia, which few people thought possible. The progress has been extraordinary, and it is not over. In the January 2012

issue of NED's *Journal of Democracy*, Larry Diamond writes that the next regional wave of democratic transitions will take place in East Asia—in Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand, and even China, where the same pressures that brought democracy to this country and to Taiwan—dramatic economic expansion, a rising middle class and a “stubbornly independent civil society”—will propel a transition. Most remarkably of all, Burma is beginning to open up, a country that until very recently seemed to be more comfortable colluding with North Korea than becoming part of the modern world. “In short,” Diamond concludes, “within a generation or so, I think it is reasonable to expect that most of East Asia will be democratic.”²

North Korea cannot resist this tide. South Koreans and Americans should not fear the coming change; we should prepare for it. We need to study the transitions that have already occurred in this region and others—successful and unsuccessful—to see what lessons can be learned for the great challenges that lie ahead. We should begin to develop the resources, the skills, and the governmental and nongovernmental institutions that will be needed to make unification work. Most of all, we need to demonstrate to the people of North Korea that they are not alone and that there are people who understand their plight and are prepared to offer moral solidarity and practical help. The outcry in South Korea in February when China forcibly repatriated more than thirty North Korean refugees was unprecedented in the way it brought together Koreans from across the political spectrum, including both government supporters and members of the political opposition as well as South Korean celebrities. Through such actions, South Koreans and human rights defenders around the world can give hope to the people of North Korea that their suffering soon shall end. ■

ENDNOTES

- 1 Stephen Haggard and Marcus Noland, *Witness to Transformation: Refugee Insights into North Korea*, (Washington, D.C: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2010), 123.
- 2 Larry Diamond, “The Coming Wave,” *Journal of Democracy* 23 (January 2012): 5-13.