



Bridging the Gap on North Korean Human Rights

by Scott Snyder and Brad Glosserman

No issue more clearly illustrates the chasm in public perceptions that has developed between the United States and South Korea than the issue of human rights in North Korea. Last October President George W. Bush signed the North Korean Human Rights Act, which provides funds to focus international attention on the problem, calls for appointment of a special envoy, and mandates special treatment for North Korean defectors.

The legislation passed unanimously in Congress in an election year, but some reformist members of the South Korean National Assembly – reflecting mainstream public opinion there – have complained that the law is a potential obstacle to inter-Korean cooperation. These “progressive” lawmakers charge that the law constitutes interference in Korean affairs and is an attempt to promote regime change on the Korean Peninsula.

This is not the first time that human rights have been a source of tension in the U.S.-ROK alliance. There were even bigger tensions when President Jimmy Carter sought to challenge South Korean strongman Park Chunghee for his authoritarian practices, including suppression of internal criticism and torture of South Korean student dissidents.

As university students, many of South Korea’s emerging generation of leaders – including many newly elected members of the National Assembly – took the Reagan administration to task for too easily accepting Park’s successor dictator Chun Doo Hwan following a coup d’etat and the suppression of democratic protest centered in Kwangju against Chun’s seizure of political power.

Today those former democracy activists and human rights lawyers who were catalysts for bringing down South Korean authoritarianism and replacing it with a vibrant democratic system have lost their voice – and their moral credibility – when it comes to North Korean oppression. The ruling party is too busy with its own historical grievances, ironically abandoning the moral high ground of fighting for North Korean human rights to conservatives most closely associated with South Korea’s old authoritarian regimes.

The South Korean government is silent in the face of a steadily increasing flow of refugee victims of North Korean oppression. Some 6,300 North Koreans have arrived in South Korea since the end of the Korean War in 1953. Last year alone, 1,890 defected to the South, an increase of 50 percent over 2003. Since 1995, it is estimated that more than 1 million North Koreans have died from famine and related disease; a generation of young North Koreans are stunted from malnutrition and hundreds of thousands more have fled the country in search of food. That act is a punishable offense, yet a rising number of North Koreans are ready to risk arrest and imprisonment to escape.

These refugees have overcome Chinese repatriation policies and South Korean official reluctance to support refugees in their quest for freedom. Contrary to its international treaty commitments, the PRC continues to deny the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees the opportunity to interview North Korean refugees to determine whether they would be in political danger from repatriation. This despite ample refugee testimony that returnees are routinely assigned to labor camps, with the harshest treatment reserved for those who have contact with Christian churches or South Koreans based in China.

The refugee testimonies of economic failure and political oppression pile up, but the South Korean government reserves public judgment, despite its own constitutional responsibilities that include the suffering North Korean people as part of South Korea’s polity. Seoul claims to remain focused on improving inter-Korean relations to promote human rights in the North. This logic argues for Korean exceptionalism at the expense of global standards. South Korea is expending not only its cash but also its moral credibility on behalf of North Korean practices that are indefensible by any standard.

Telling the truth about the human rights situation in North Korea will not alter North Korea’s structural dependence on handouts from Seoul or Beijing, nor does it prevent Seoul from continuing to engage in inter-Korean economic cooperation where it is perceived to be in South Korea’s national interest to do so. Tellingly, North Korean officials responded calmly to a blistering rendition of North Korean human rights practices during a visit to Pyongyang by British Minister Bill Rammell last September. North Korean officials also accepted the visit earlier this year of Congressman Tom Lantos, an author of the North Korean Human Rights Act.

North Korea appeals to “national brotherhood” as the basis for inter-Korean cooperation, but it is widely known that the success or failure of family reunions, the Mt. Kumgang project, and now the Kaesong industrial zone are oiled primarily by North Korea’s desperate need for cash that is the result of its own economic bankruptcy. South Korean progressives – who have contributed so much to South Korea’s political transformation – should be at the forefront of a true effort to promote “national brotherhood” by extending social justice and international human rights standards to the entire Korean Peninsula.

A first step would be for the South Korean government to join with the judgment of the international community at this year’s UN Human Rights Conference in Geneva to condemn human rights practices inside North Korea that fail to meet global standards.

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