

Upholding Human Rights In North Korea: How the United States and UN Can Work Together in
Promoting Freedom and Justice For Citizens Under Communist Rule

Deborah Adeniji

Professor Joseph Wiegand

International Law, Policy and Politics

Liberty University

Abstract:

This paper will explore the many ways that human rights in North Korea has been looked at by the United Nations, along with the work that has been done to tackle this issue. It will also explore the policies that have been made in the past, as well as what can be done in the future to uphold human rights for citizens of North Korea. Most important of all, this paper will provide ways that the United States can work across the political spectrum, going beyond party lines so as to fulfill the goal of what is best for North Korean citizens far and wide.

Keywords: North Korea, Communism, United States, justice, human rights, democracy, Kim dynasty, refugees and defectors, women's rights, religious freedom, human dignity

Introduction

When the United Nations Charter was instituted in 1945 after the end of a bloody war, it brought about a new era of change for much of the world (UN 1945). Through the United Nations Charter, the world realized that love for humanity is more important than a desire or struggle to win a war. One of the crucial areas that was emphasized in the United Nations Charter is the need to uphold human rights across all sectors of the globe (Un 1945). Over the past few decades, much of what has been discussed about North Korea is concerning the fight to build peace and disarm the use of nuclear weapons. While we cannot deny the fact that those issues indeed need attention at this time, we also must take into consideration that there is something that this nation needs much more than the disarmament of nuclear weapons----- and that is for its people to be treated with dignity, as well as be free from tyranny. In this brief, we will explore the human rights problem facing North Korea, while also providing solutions to how this problem should be solved both from the national and international level.

Background: Life Under North Korea's Dictatorship

In her book, *In Order to Live*, Yeonmi Park (2015) details the problems that an average North Korean citizen under Communist rule faces daily. Many individuals and families under this regime go through extreme brutal suffering, as portrayed in the example of Yeonmi and her family who grew up in a life of poverty. The poverty that Yeonmi experienced was so great that it led her father to participate in illegal trading business that eventually ended him up in prison.

According to North Korean standards, children are to be punished for the crimes of their parents; therefore it was not only the father that faced severe imprisonment, but Yeonmi and the rest of the family suffered for it as well (Park 2015). This was to indicate that living under tyrannical rule can sure be a detriment to one's standard of living.

Besides spending her life in poverty, Yeonmi witnessed slavery, oppression and mistreatment from the government, even to a point where her individuality was taken away from her. At school, she was only allowed to be taught whatever the Kim dynasty had prescribed for her; in other words, there was no room for critical thinking, curiosity or open-mindedness (Park 2015, Chs. 1-10). In terms of media consumption, citizens were only allowed to consume whatever the government wanted them to consume, thus giving room for a limited view of the outside world. Unlike its sister country South Korea who has been known for placing great emphasis on the need for education and critical thinking, North Korea has been completely reclusive in its approach to life, relationships and the world at large (Park 2015).

The basic freedoms----- freedom of speech, freedom of religion, the right to protest and the like----- never existed under the Kim dynasty. Nobody was allowed to practice any religion or faith under this regime, because according to the regime, the Kim dynasty is considered God to the people of North Korea (Park 2015); therefore worship and homage should only be paid to the dynasty's leader, which in Yeonmi Park's case was the current president Kim Jong Un (Park 2015). Under Communist North Korea, there has never been a regard for morality. Prostitution, sexual exploitation and human trafficking were the predominant ways for citizens to earn a living, and as a result, many women, children and vulnerable citizens have had their rights being taken away from them (Robinson 2019).

As a teenager, Yeonmi decided to escape from this brutal, secluded life of bondage in North Korea to a place of freedom (Park 2015, Chs. 11-12). It was a long, difficult journey for her: she was sold as a prostitute while traveling on foot through China; she experienced cold and extreme starvation while crossing the frozen river through Mongolia; and she was always on the lookout for soldiers who were trying to pursue her as she was reaching the border that led to South Korea. Thankfully, after all the toil she faced, Yeonmi finally found her freedom (Chs. 15-19). She spent most of her adolescence and early adulthood in South Korea, then later moved to the United States which is now her home (Park 2015, Chs. 19-22). Although she was not used to this new life of freedom at first, over time she was willing to adapt. Through the help and support she received both in South Korea and the US, Yeonmi was now able to understand what it truly takes to experience a life of freedom. Therefore, it is always important to take note that freedom, though precious and desirable, does come with a great price.

Freedom and the United States' Founding

Thomas Jefferson, in his Declaration of Independence, stated that there is a truth to be considered which cannot be denied, and that is each and every human being is created in the image of God. Because we are created in the image of God, we have been given basic human rights, among which are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness (Jefferson 1776); this was one of the very foundations that have shaped America into what it is today (Hamilton, Madison & Jay 1788). Although this country has not always been perfect in the area of embodying freedom,

as seen in many examples portrayed in history, over the course of time other nations who look to America as their role model have concluded that this is indeed a nation where the values of freedom, democracy and equal human rights are all embodied. The US Constitution (1787) lays out some very important principles as to how these values should be applied. The First Amendment, for example, proposes that every citizen is given the right to worship and practice their faith freely, thus the need for a separation between church and state (Constitution 1787; Jefferson 1802).

Many immigrants and refugees who have fled to the United States as a result of the persecution they have experienced in their birth country, as seen in the case of Yeonmi Park from North Korea, count their new country as home to them (Park 2015; Cohen 2011; Gutierrez 2017). Some view the United States as a place where they could thrive economically, while others view it as a place where they could grow in their innovative skills and share their diverse cultures. But above all, the majority of immigrants and refugees look to their new country as an embodiment of freedom, justice and equality, which sadly not very many countries embody (Gutierrez 2017). In their new country, they can worship and practice their faith freely without government interference, bring diverse ideas to the table without being shunned, and simply be individuals who could think for themselves rather than letting the government think for them. These freedoms indeed should never be taken for granted (Park 2015; Gutierrez 2017). North Korea, unlike the United States, is a country where individual freedom is thrown out the window; it is no wonder many North Koreans over the course of history have become antagonistic towards America and its values. Most people may be wondering why there is so much enmity between the United States and North Korea, why the values of these two countries are so opposed to one another. It all came about as a result of what happened during the Korean War of 1950-1953.

Lessons From the Korean War (1950-1953)

Over the past few decades before WWII, Korea, then a unified country, was under Japanese rule (Cumings 2011; Hickey 2000). By the time the Second World War drew to a close, however, Russia, then referred to as the Soviet Union or USSR, decided it was time they declared war on Japan (Hickey 2000). It was during this time that the United States determined to occupy the Korean peninsula so as to keep the Soviet Union from invading it (Cumings 2011). Tensions began to break out between these two global superpowers, the Soviet Union and the United States, because each wanted to gain control of the territory.

By the summer of 1945, the northern tip of the Korean peninsula had already been occupied by the Soviet Union. This had eventually led the United States to split Korea in half, creating what is now known as the 38th Parallel or Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), thus the reason Korea is now two countries instead of one (Cunningham 2000). Years later, North Korea would have already been under the control of the Soviet Union, while South Korea under the control of the United States (Hickey 2000). It is no wonder the two sister countries, though similar in culture, language and geography, have two completely different governments, worldviews and lifestyles (Cong 2016). Unlike South Korea who, due to American influence, is under a system of government that values democracy and equal rights for all, North Korea is under a completely opposite system of government----- the Communist regime (Park 2015).

When Communist forces tried to invade South Korea between 1948 and 1950, the US determined it was time to act (Cumings 2011; Hickey 2000); this was what brought about the beginning of the Korean War, which would last for about four years. Like the American Civil War of 1861-1865, this Korean War was brother against brother (Cunningham 2000). Many families were separated from each other so much so that it brought about bloodshed and violence. Although this was a war that did not end well for the United States and a few of its allies, overall there was a genuine cause for this war to be fought. Communism has been threatening democracy ever since WWII, thus it was necessary for the US and other Western democratic countries to play their own part in the fight against this oppressive ideology (Cunningham 2000; Kim 2016).

Past Policies: How Have Human Rights Been Tackled Since the Korean War

Despite the fact that the United States lost the Korean War of 1950-1953, one crucial thing to take note is that it has never given up on the fight to uphold freedom and democracy both nationally and globally. Though the Korean War was brutal and many people, Korean and American alike, have died gruesome deaths, there were good things that came out of it. One of such good things is the efforts put on the need for North Korean citizens under Communist oppression to find freedom. Organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea have worked tirelessly to pursue the goal of building solidarity and providing support for those who have fled, or are fleeing, from tyranny. This is to indicate that the refugee crisis is one of the major issues facing international politics and diplomacy today (Cohen 2011; Eng 2021). Many North Korean defectors and refugees have risked their lives in search for a place to call their new home (Cohen 2011; Park 2015). The United States has been known primarily for its generous service towards refugees fleeing from war-torn countries. While, policy-wise, it has not always been perfect in handling the refugee crisis well, overall it is working hard to fulfill its promise of making sure such refugees find the freedom that they deserve. Sadly, not very many North Korean refugees have been admitted to the United States since the war of 1950-1953 (Cohen 2011; Eng 2021).

When the North Korean Human Rights Act was instituted by the United Nations in 2004, certain policies have been made as to where North Korean refugees could call their new home. In 2008, a group of US Congress leaders have proposed that South Korea, the sister country, would be best for them to settle, given that the country is where they could easily relate with those of like mind and culture (Cohen 2011). Though there is a valid reason for this proposition, it does not negate the reality that there are still those who have a genuine desire to live in the US; and, moreover, due to the restrictions that have been placed on them, not every North Korean is able to relocate to South Korea (Cohen 2011). Thus the proposal that was made by the US government, unfortunately, had left many North Koreans ineligible for refugee status.

Thankfully as the years progressed, many changes have been made to this proposal, and little by little more North Korean refugees were accepted. This is primarily due to the United Nations' recognition of North Korea's human rights problem in the recent decade (Robinson 2019). Many achievements have been made by the Committee for Human Rights, as well as other international organizations with similar goals and mind-sets. Among such achievements are

the following: those in prison camps have been attended to; those who are destitute have been given basic necessities such as food, clothing and shelter; and those with a desire to learn have been able to access quality education. Although such international organizations have achieved so much over the recent years, there is still a lot of work that needs to be done.

Present Policies: How the US-South Korea Alliance Can Pave the Way For a Better Approach to North Korea's Human Rights Problem

As discussed earlier, one of the very fabrics that have shaped South Korea into the democracy it is today stems from the influence the United States has had over the past decades. Now that new global superpowers are rising up, it is necessary that countries work towards collaborating with one another as a team so as to promote the general welfare of all humanity (Harris & Lee 2021). The United States and South Korea have been allies ever since the Korean War of the 1950s (Heo 2018). This alliance has resulted in the following: economic trade which has brought about financial prosperity in South Korea, social and cultural integration between Korean and American communities, and shared interests in the growth and education of the youth. But above all, one primary factor that continues to drive this alliance and team collaboration between the US and South Korea is that both countries have the same concern for where North Korea's regime is headed.

During the presidency of Donald Trump, the two countries' relationships have been in turmoil. Although they were still willing to trade economically, the US and South Korea had not been able to get along for a while. This was due to the fact that Trump at some point in his presidency endorsed the enemy country's leader, Kim Jong Un (Harris and Lee 2021). Despite the tension the two partners experienced, they still maintain their alliance with one another, especially now that President Joe Biden is in office. This indicates that a healthy diplomacy does not necessarily have to be partisan; in other words, as nations work around their differences, over time they will at some point find common ground (Henderson 2010). Therefore, as the United States and the UN continue to work towards tackling North Korea's human rights problem, most times it is best to put political differences aside in recognition of the fact that there is a common enemy that needs to be fought; that common enemy is Communism, which has been plaguing North Korea for decades since the war of the 1950s began.

Future Policies: A Non-Partisan Approach To Human Rights

How can the United States work across the political spectrum to fulfill its goal of building an environment where North Koreans can live, survive and thrive freely? Most times whenever public policy is discussed among US government leaders, many of the issues discussed are often approached through partisan lenses. In other words, whatever the ruling party is concerned about at the moment is what should be tackled. One party may be concerned about disarming nuclear weapons and stopping terrorism, while the other party may be concerned with human rights and peace-building. Sadly, with the partisan mind-set, it can be very impossible for the nation to achieve the goal it wants to achieve in foreign policy.

What happened with the North Korea refugee proposal in 2008 is a perfect example of the partisan mind-set at work (Cohen 2011). Though the ruling party made a reasonable decision

at that time, this decision resulted in some serious consequences in the long run. Therefore, as the United States works towards building a healthy approach to foreign policy, one thing that its leaders should always take note is the need to work not just with the ruling party, but also across all sides of the spectrum. This is one of the main ingredients that has made international diplomacy what it is today.

In the case of tackling North Korea's human rights problem, one thing to suggest to the public is encouraging Koreans living in America to get involved in politics and human rights activism. Whether they came to this country as defectors from the Communist north or immigrants from the free and democratic south, there is a way for all Koreans to contribute to the public sector and have their voices heard. Civil discourse is needed now more than ever, and for sure this will create more avenues for healthy discussions and debates to take place, as opposed to just hearing the ruling party's side.

Conclusion

Just as there is a need for a party that focuses on the military side of foreign policy (e.g. disarming weapons, building security and standing up against terrorism or other major threats to democracy), there is also a need for a party with concern for the human side (building peace after war, providing relief for destitute families, upholding justice and freedom for all citizens, etc.) Both parties are equally crucial at this time, and one cannot overrule the other. The Apostle Paul in Ephesians (4:1-6) advised that God's people should walk in unity, knowing that though they have different areas of calling, at the end they all fulfill the same goal----- proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ to the world. The same goes with the United States and its responsibilities toward foreign policy; though its leadership consists of people with various ideas and areas of focus, it is still one nation with a common goal. Let us all take into consideration what true diplomacy is all about: as individuals with various callings, we seek to bring all our ideas to the table so as to work through them, leaving nothing undone.

Another important thing to take note as we strive towards promoting human rights across the globe is this: There is need for a leadership that advocates for justice and protects the dignity of all citizens, regardless of social status. Human rights is one of the most important glues that hold a nation together; without the nation's recognition of the human rights of its people, it would be very impossible for that nation to prosper (Henderson 2010). As the Bible has stated in the book of Proverbs that when righteousness rules a nation, there is likely to be prosperity in that nation (Proverbs 14:34; Proverbs 29:2). Therefore, in order for North Korea and its people to experience prosperity, it needs to have righteous leaders----- those who are willing to lead the nation with justice and truth rather than aristocratic power, because at the end, aristocratic power may not always last.

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