

Policy on Human Rights in North

By Chung Da-woon



Thanks to the Sunshine Policy of Reconciliation, a previously unthinkable scene of warmth and goodwill in South Korea is being publicly displayed without any fear or suspicion of their North Korean neighbors, who had been demonized for a half-century. Demonstrating deep concern for the North Koreans who were affected by the latest tragedy of the Ryongchon train explosion, South Koreans have shown their solidarity with the North Korean disaster victims in nationwide fundraising events. In addition, the government, together with several non-governmental organizations, has played a leading role in coordinating different types of domestic and international humanitarian efforts to aid the disaster areas in the North. In hopes of further easing tensions with North Korea, the progressive administration, led by a former human rights lawyer, continues to tolerate North Korea's poor human rights record.

In the 60th U.N. Human Rights Commission's (UNHRC) meeting held in Geneva, Switzerland, on April 15, the South Korean government abstained from voting to adopt an EU-sponsored resolution on the "Situation of Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea." The South Korean government cited its diplomatic priority on the improvement of inter-Korean relations as an excuse to abstain. Last year, for the same reason, the South Korean delegates at the UNHRC refused to take part in discussions on the DPRK and walked out during the voting session. The resolution, which was passed with support from 27 countries despite South Korea's abstention, criticizes North Korea's human rights records. The government in the North has not fully complied with the provisions of international human rights conventions it has ratified. The resolution also called for the appointment of an independent special envoy, who will investigate claims of torture and other human rights abuses in the North.

Given the geopolitical environment that constrains policy options promoting human rights, realists believe that South Korea's neutrality at the UNHRC is the best approach to accomplish desirable outcomes in the upcoming six-party talks focusing on regional security. Traditional diplomatic approaches should also compel Seoul to avoid provoking the Kim Jong-il regime that could jeopardize peace on the Korean peninsula. The current level of rapport between Seoul and Pyongyang has been built after several years of efforts. Furthermore, a compartmentalized view on security and human rights also influences the South Korean government's decision to

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prioritize peace, improve inter-Korean relations and human rights conditions in the North.

Nevertheless, such a policy is sure to disappoint and agitate many ordinary South Koreans. The UNHRC abstention demonstrates the extent to which the South Korean administration is neglecting its responsibility as a party to 12 international human rights conventions; all created to protect people around the world from dismal rights abuses such as those the North Koreans experience. After the voting, the North Korean delegates made it clear that it would not comply with the resolution because "it (the resolution) seeks an impure political purpose beyond the human rights issue." It seems that Seoul's decision to abstain from the vote lends credence to such rhetoric frequently used by rights-violating countries that often dismiss human rights charges as an imperialistic political conspiracy to undermine sovereign states.

Furthermore, the administration's current approach to North Korean human rights reflects its lack of understanding of the complementary nature between the improvement of stability, security and human rights. Security and respecting human rights should not be considered mutually exclusive concepts in pursuing a policy toward the North if the administration sincerely contemplates a long-term vision of national reunification. In the end, the North Korean government's increased respect for people's basic rights will serve as a necessary condition toward a smooth transition for one united democratic Korea.

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