

Policy Forum 05-34A: The Controversies of South Korean Society on the Issue of Human Rights in North Korea

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Bohyuk Suh

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I. Introduction

Bohyuk Suh, an expert advisor at the National Human Rights Commission of Korea, writes: "The North Korean human rights issue should not be the only issue to be viewed, but rather, the general situation in and outside of Korea, and the task of settling for peace on the Korean peninsula, should be viewed together as a whole."

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II. Essay by Bohyuk Suh

-The Controversies of South Korean Society on the Issue of Human Rights in North Korea
by Bohyuk Suh

I. Introduction

After the collapse of the Cold war, as the sovereignty of individual nations began to be challenged by super national norms, the development of nuclear weapons and the situation of human rights in North Korea is becoming a primary subject of international concern. Within Korean society, many different opinions exist on the North Korean nuclear issue. Likewise, there are also controversies on the issue of human rights in North Korea. This article will be looking into these controversies in the following six categories: i) the current situation of human rights, ii) the root causes of human rights problems, iii) the conditions of the displaced, iv) the problems of planned displacement and the problems in returning, v) the evaluation of the North Korean Human Rights Act legislated by the United States of America, and vi) the direction we are to take in order to improve human rights in North Korea. We will also be focusing on what these controversies suggest.

II. The controversies

1. The current situation of human rights in North Korea

It is generally acknowledged that North Koreans are facing a very serious encroachment on their human rights. So, what is the actual situation like? Also, what are the boundaries in the concept of human rights? What do the controversies of human rights in North Korea suggest? The controversies can mainly be divided into two issues; firstly, one which emphasizes the rights of freedom, and secondly, one which stresses social rights alongside third generation human rights, such as the right for development and the right for peace.

The former, in particular, concerns an infringement on the basic rights for life, that is, to be able to openly express oneself and to have religious freedom, while the latter concerns the right to live. Of course, the former also covers the shortage of food in North Korea, but here talk is limited to emphasizing the need for a fair supply system. The latter points out that at this stage the most important right of all is the right to live. Furthermore, considering the threat of an American nuclear attack and the low economic development of North Korea, it deems the right for peace and development to be of equal importance.

Thus, even though both sides agree on the poor human rights situation in North Korea, they differ in what they see as the most important issue. Such a difference in opinion leads to the question of what the causes of these human rights problems are. In addition to this, beneath the controversies lie different perspectives on the North Korean regime.

2. The causes of North Korean human rights problems

Regarding the causes of the North Korean human rights problems, views differ as to whether to focus on looking into the main causes of the matter separately, or whether to look at the causes together as a whole. While the former view finds the key cause to be the North Korean regime, the latter claims that, even though the responsibilities of the North Korean regime play a part, the causes are hard to simplify, and that there are many political and economic factors, both internally and internationally, that could also be the reason for the human rights problems. Even though there are various causes for the violations, controversy remains as to what is the prime cause of the issue.

3. The condition of the displaced

One of the most highlighted problems of all in the North Korean human rights issue is the conditions in which the displaced are living. The estimated number of the displaced varies greatly according to the different methods of research. Also, controversies on the intentions of the displaced make it uncertain as to whether or not the displaced can be classified as refugees. Reports indicate that the rights of the displaced are being encroached at even the most basic level.

4. The problems of planned displacement

The core of the controversy surrounding the issue of planned displacement is in the intentions and effects of such actions. The organizations supporting planned displacement insist that these are humanitarian actions taken in order to help and respect the wants and needs of the displaced. On the contrary, those who criticize planned displacement argue that these kinds of actions simply worsen the threat of forced repatriation of those left behind. In the end, this controversy leads to the question of how these problems can be solved. Whereas the former emphasizes the inevitability of displacement, the latter insists that only the reconstruction of the North Korean economy and humanitarian aids can solve the matter.

5. The evaluation of the North Korean Human Rights Act

The North Korean Human Rights Act legislated by the United States of America is another issue with controversies. Those in favor of the act claim that it is a result of the long prepared hard work of civil organizations and conscientious intellectuals, and that the human rights problem should be effectively addressed through looking into North Korean issues. On the other hand, however, those who oppose the act insist that the act is legislated in order to be used as a means to put pressure on North Korea, and even to bring down the current North Korean regime. They worry that such an act may not only aggravate North Korea and China, but also that it may have a negative impact on the peace policies between the two Koreas.

6. The direction to take

Those debating the North Korean human rights issue still fail to find a point to

agree on, even when it comes to what directions must be sought in dealing with it. Although they stand parallel to one another, one side stresses the need for the collapse of the North Korean regime, and the other side maintains that there is a need for a gradual approach to the issue, focusing on the right to live, with peace on the Korean peninsular.

III. Conclusion

What we can conclude from the controversies shown in the six categories above, is that firstly, the very different views on the North Korean regime greatly affect the foundations of specific debates, and secondly, that contrasting views strongly oppose and exclude one another. Naturally, it is possible to point out the responsibilities of the North Korean regime in its human rights problems, but relating personal views on the regime to situations and schemes to improve the human rights status in North Korea should be avoided. Ironically, it is clear that it is only when both views are taken into consideration that a full understanding and complete proposal seems possible.

The North Korean human rights issue should not be the only issue to be viewed, but rather, the general situation in and outside of Korea, and the task of settling for peace on the Korean peninsular, should be viewed together as a whole. In this sense, it is essential that in order to improve human rights in North Korea, a rational, gradual approach should be taken, with a comprehensive and balanced understanding. In this way, the controversies above will have a positive impact on the policies toward solving North Korean human rights problems, rather than a negative impact that arises only from the different views on the North Korean regime. Furthermore, there is a need for the international society to fully understand the controversies within Korean society, and to work with Korean society in deciding what it is that can really make a material difference to the current North Korean human rights situation.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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