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(1936-2016)

@hrf

hrf.org

/humanrightsfoundation

/humanrightsfdn

contact@hrf.org

+1 (212) 246-8486

President Moon Jae-In
1 Cheongwadae-ro,
Sejongno, Jongno-gu,
Seoul, Republic of Korea

Dear President Moon,

We respectfully urge you to uphold your country's democratic principles and refrain from violating the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of association of South Korean citizens who have chosen to be vocal and to demonstrate their discontent with North Korea's totalitarian regime.

According to a statement released by the Ministry of Unification on June 10, your government will file official complaints against, and revoke the incorporation registrations of, Fighters for a Free North Korea and Keunsaem, two North Korean defector organizations whose mission is to send information to fellow North Koreans still suffering under the Kim regime. If your government proceeds with these actions, it would be a concerning violation of the rights of Korean citizens and would represent an alarming shift in the state of fundamental freedoms and democracy in the Republic of Korea, and a violation of the universally recognized right to receive information.

In 2018, your government stated its vision for South Korea as that of an "Innovatively Tolerant" nation — one that "innovates itself to guarantee a humane life to all Koreans, regardless of gender, background, social class, or age." In 2019, you announced further plans to implement this vision by "guaranteeing equal opportunity and justice, and ensuring not a single Korean citizen is subject to discrimination." To be clear, this includes the approximately 33,500 South Korean citizens of North Korean origin.

It's important to remember that North Korea is defined as a fully authoritarian regime, in which there is no separation of powers between the judiciary, legislature, and executive branches of government. There is no freedom of association, expression, press, or religion. The 2014 United Nations Commission of Inquiry found extensive violation in fundamental freedoms, such as the right to life, food, residence, and employment — as well as the right to be free from arbitrary detention and torture. North Koreans have no access to outside information except for what is reported on state television, which consists of purely propaganda praising the Kim regime.

Organizations such as Fighters for a Free North Korea and Keunsaem, run by defectors Park Sang-hak and Park Jun-oh, are two of the few civil society groups focusing on bringing outside information into the world's most closed and intolerant society. Defectors are the only ones capable of representing the voices of the 25 million North Korean people living without access to the internet, outside mail, or any piece of uncensored information. Not only are they exerting their democratic right to freedom of expression, they are helping the people of North Korea reclaim their right to receive information.

The policy interest behind your government's decision to prevent these organizations from operating without interference does not seem to be a policy that correctly weighs the government's legitimate interest to protect its national security with the key democratic interest to protect the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of association of all South Korean citizens, especially those who devote their lives to doing something about the horrors occurring on the other side of the DMZ.

We are appalled and alarmed by this recent decision. South Korea has been one of the few countries in Asia that has been able to achieve true democracy, and with it, individual freedom. Stripping two important defector-run organizations of their legal status would suggest that the current administration is not holding itself to the standard of a liberal democracy, in which individual freedoms are protected and valued, but instead sliding dangerously into authoritarianism, in which civil activism and free speech are routinely suppressed.

Additionally, revoking the registration of defector-run organizations violates both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, both of which clearly outline the fundamental right to freedom of expression and the right to seek, receive and impart information. As a member state of the United Nations and home to one of the few UN Human Rights Offices in Asia, South Korea must safeguard these rights for all its citizens, including those of North Korean origin.

As someone who has personally fought on the frontlines of South Korea's battle to democracy against dictators Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan in the 1970s and 1980s, you must understand the importance of civil society participation as well as the inclusion of the most disadvantaged populations in a nation. South Koreans once again showed their dedication to liberal democracy during the 2016 protests against Park Geun-hye, resulting in South Korea's first-ever impeachment of an incumbent president.

North Korean defectors, who are recognized as citizens from the moment they arrive in South Korea, should enjoy the same basic rights as any South Korean citizen. As people who have suffered and escaped tyranny, it is their right to enjoy their newly found freedoms, to criticize and undermine the dictatorial regimes that led them to leave their home country in the first place, should they wish to. Instead of prohibiting it, Seoul should encourage the principled work of North Korean defectors who, at huge peril to their lives, were able to make it into the democratic part of the Korean Peninsula, and now, as South Korean citizens free from the Kim regime's oppression, refuse to normalize and forget the horrendous predicament facing millions of their fellow Koreans.

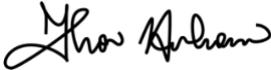
HRF believes that the persecution of Fighters for a Free North Korea and Keun Saem in observance of their freedom of association and expression will set back South Korea's record as a democratic nation. As a human rights lawyer, and as the President of Asia's leading democracy, your repression of the voices of North Korean defectors who speak for their 2.5 million fellow countrymen will go against South Korea's history as a country that has innovated its path to a more tolerant and just society.

We respectfully urge you to uphold the democratic principles valued highly by the South Korean people and refrain from conducting any action that might obstruct the work of Free North Korea and Keun Saem, as well as any future actions against North Korean defector-activists fighting to expose the horrors of the Kim regime.

Sincerely,



Garry Kasparov
Chairman, Human Rights Foundation



Thor Halvorsen
President, Human Rights Foundation