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5 North Korean defector activism and South Korean politics

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The decade 1998–2008 is popularly dubbed the “era of engagement” in South Korea: a period in which the newly elected administration of Kim Dae-jung sought to eschew the patterns of conflict characteristic of the years since the Korean Peninsula’s division and advocated an approach to cross-border relations commonly known as the “Sunshine Policy” (Haetpyōt chŏngch’aeck), which privileged norms of gentle persuasion and engagement over force and competition.

This entirely new paradigm was accompanied by the creation of a series of democratic institutions in South Korea. At the same time, the Sunshine Policy was promoted as a reflection of popular ideas about how inter-Korean relations should be conducted. For too long, President Kim Dae-jung argued, decision-making in the area of inter-Korean relations had been insulated from public debate by rightwing, authoritarian governments that had chosen to frame the issue solely as a security problem requiring strong restrictions on public debate. As such, the “Sunshine era” was meant to shed light, not just on engagement with the North Korean government and people, but also with the South Korean public, creating opportunities for a variety of hitherto excluded voices and ideas to enter public discourse. The results of this policy, however, cut both ways. While it is true that the Sunshine Policy benefitted progressive voices that had long called for greater engagement with and understanding of North Korea, this chapter explores the experiences of a smaller group of activists on the other end of the political spectrum for whom the new paradigm was exclusive rather than inclusive: North Korean defectors turned human rights activists.¹

Before exploring the particular experiences of a variety of North Korean defector groups,² I will briefly discuss the South Korean political context in which reports of human rights abuses in North Korea first came to the attention of various sectors of the South Korean population. I will then discuss the state and evolution of the debate over North Korean human rights in South Korea, with a focus on the political and civil society spheres. In this context, discussion of the place of defector politics in the broader policy-making process will precede a more in-depth examination of some key North Korean defector activist groups.³
A new era of democracy and engagement?

Promises of transparency and an acceptance of difference defined the early days of the Kim Dae-jung administration. The new generation of leaders in Seoul had sharpened their political teeth during the dissident human rights and democracy campaigns of the 1970s and 80s. These former activists now populated government, public service and civil society leadership positions and brought with them a willingness to accept Pyongyang as a legitimate negotiating partner. The new political paradigm in South Korea had important consequences for public debate over inter-Korean relations. The democratic space that opened up in this period held forth the prospect that new conversations regarding the conduct of inter-Korean relations would be encouraged and enabled.

The Sunshine Policy thus promised to bring an end to the essentialist rhetoric that had characterized cross-border relations throughout the decades of Cold War antagonism. Rather than casting North Korea as an ideological enemy and threatening “Other,” this new era of inter-Korean relations would, it was hoped, emphasize the similarities between the two countries. In this sense, similarities were seen to extend beyond common security interests – the prevention of another Korean War – to embrace a shared identity and sense of cultural homogeneity. Returning home from the Pyongyang inter-Korean Summit in 2000, Kim Dae-jung addressed the nation with language that drew on this new, humanizing approach:

Fellow Koreans,

I have just returned home after completing the historic visit to North Korea ... I found that Pyongyang, too, was our land, indeed. The Pyongyang people are the same as us, the same nation sharing the same blood. Regardless of what they have been saying and acting outwardly, they have deep love and a longing for their compatriots in the South. If you talk with them, you notice that right away. That is quite natural because we have been a homogenous nation for thousands of years. We lived as a unified nation for 1,300 years before we were divided 55 years ago against our will. It is impossible for us to continue to live separated physically and spiritually. I was able to reconfirm this fact first-hand during this visit. I have returned with the conviction that, sooner or later, we will become reconciled with each other, cooperate and finally get reunited.

(Kim Dae-jung 2004: 127-128)

It was in this context that troubling reports of widespread and systematic human rights violations in North Korea came to the attention of South Korean political activists. It was clear that the authoritarian Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) regime was directly responsible for the violations. By the time the Kim Dae-jung administration was voted into office in 1997, news of the North Korean human rights situation was slowly becoming a matter of public interest in South Korea. In the years that followed, the dire state of human rights in North
Korea was extensively documented and the central concerns of human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch centered on violations of the right to food and right to life. The lack of freedom of association and of movement was seen to further compound these areas of concern, with North Korean citizens facing severe restrictions vis-à-vis access to food sources and medical care and facing the threat of arbitrary detention, torture or death if they sought to express dissent of any kind.\(^5\)

South Korean activists who chose to take up the issue of North Korean human rights found that the new atmosphere of cooperation and dialogue did not extend to discourse that challenged any aspect of the government’s engagement-oriented approach to inter-Korean relations. It quickly became clear that the Sunshine era did not in fact allow for open debate over peninsular security issues. Once again, there turned out to be little space for competing paradigms. The point of contact between the Koreas and single most important interface continued to be the politically institutionalized practice of inter-Korean dialogue. Rather than expanding the inter-Korean interface, division was once again affirmed as a political given against which the more serious business of security politics was to be monopolized by state actors who now emphasized norms of cooperation over conflict. In the following section, I examine how the physical border between the two Koreas functioned, not only as a barrier, but also as an ideological divide that had become deeply embedded in the day-to-day political culture of South Korea.

As a structuring concept, the notion of interface helps shed light both on the challenges defector activists face as they strive to find a voice in their new country, as well as the nature of defector politics itself. A brief overview of the political discourse surrounding the issue of inter-Korean relations during the Sunshine era reveals that the division of the Peninsula had become deeply embedded within the country’s national political identity. In the newly democratic South Korea, debate over inter-Korean relations in general -- and the issue of North Korean human rights in particular -- was particularly divisive. The border, in this sense, acted not simply as an external geo-political and spatial construct but also as a social interface that shaped both South Korean state identity and activist opposition forces.

At the local socio-political level, the notion of interfaces is also instructive: “the Korean interface ... constitutes a point of rupture that gives rise to extremely complex contact areas, but few direct exchanges” (Gélégzau et al. 2010).\(^6\) The case of North Korean defector politics is no exception. The difficulties experienced by North Koreans attempting to enter the South Korean labor market reveal their low level of integration into South Korean society (Bidet 2009). Rather than representing a point of cohesion, North Koreans living in the South form a sort of social enclave -- a point at which the interface is disruptive rather than cohesive (Gélégzau et al. 2010). As the case studies below reveal, North Korean defector activists face difficulties with their communications (both externally and internally) and thus struggle to have their voices heard in the noisy civil society arena that characterizes South Korean political culture. The internal politics of the North Korean defector community -- a subset of the wider North Korean community in South Korea -- can be seen as part of a broader, complex
system of interfaces. Within this system, relationships among the defectors are
tense and the degree to which communication flows among its various com-
ponents is at times limited. The realization that the North–South interface affects
the manner in which North Korean defector activists communicate externally
(with South Korean society) and internally (among themselves) thus sheds light
on the importance of the structuring divisions between the groups themselves.
The manner in which the various defector groups choose to deal with this inter-
face has an impact on their political output as well as on the type of networking
the groups engage in. While some of the groups elect to contain their activities
within the borders of the South Korean state, others look outwards and network
with human rights activists across the globe, extending the point of interface
even further.

The politics of inter-Korean relations

Kim Dae-jung’s Sunshine Policy was at first met with some skepticism, coming
as it did on the heels of the 1997 Asian financial crisis which had dealt a severe
blow to Korea’s economy. This skepticism persisted through much of the new
government’s first two years in office.¹ 1999, however, saw the first real test of
Kim Dae-jung’s engagement policy: as the first South Korean tourists trickled
over the border to North Korea’s Mount Kumgang resort, news reached the
public of North Korean transgressions in the West Sea involving the disputed
Northern Limit Line (NLL). Under Kim Dae-jung, the South Korean navy took
a strong stance against North Korean aggression, helping to galvanize support
for the Sunshine Policy and going some way to combat opposition charges that
the engagement approach was no more than a dangerous form of appeasement.
Over the course of the year, mainstream society in South Korea gradually began
to accept the Sunshine Policy, laying the foundations for the paradigm-breaking
Pyongyang Summit.² In early 2000, Kim Dae-jung’s popularity, buoyed by the
successful summit, obtained approval levels of around 70–72 percent, with polls
revealing that the Nobel Committee’s decision to grant the Peace Prize to Kim
Dae-jung was welcomed by a majority of South Koreans (Ha Yong-chool 2001).
In a country like South Korea, where ideology frequently informs political
debate and consensus is rare (and sometimes non-existent), this kind of broad-
based support was remarkable. Under these circumstances, criticism of Kim
Dae-jung’s approach to inter-Korean relations did not find a receptive audience.

It was not until sometime into the government of Kim Dae-jung’s successor,
Roh Moo-hyun, that the South Korean public started to show some receptivity
to criticism of the Sunshine Policy, referred to under the new administration as
the “Policy for Peace and Prosperity.” President Roh Moo-hyun was an openly
ideological politician who held strong liberal views and staunchly favored
engagement-led inter-Korean relations. He was, however, seen as a weak leader
and increasingly left the job of defending the government’s inter-Korean rela-
tions policy to the Ministry of Unification.³ In this context, opposition argu-
ments started to gain some traction in civil society and the South Korean media.
Accusing successive progressive governments of having propped up a corrupt
and cruel regime in North Korea, the opposition Grand National Party (GNP) demanded that the issue of universal human rights become a component of inter-Korean dialogue. Progressives argued that such an approach would be counterproductive and harm cross-border relations: not only would it cause the North Korean regime to close its borders even tighter and refuse food aid (a situation that would serve to worsen the human rights situation), it would also signal the death knell of cooperative relations between the two countries. These groups further argued that the most pressing human rights concern facing North Koreans was lack of proper food and medical facilities and that the provision of these, as well as efforts to build up the North Korean economy, was where the energies of South Korean government and civil society should instead be focused.

This dualistic debate over the North Korean human rights situation found its roots in the ideological cultures that informed both sides of the political scene and few innovative arguments were to be heard from either of the dominant parties. Those in the progressive, “pro-engagement” camp accused their detractors (from the conservative GNP) of harboring a pro-US, anti-North Korean political agenda ultimately aimed at bringing about regime change in North Korea by any means available. These supporters of the Sunshine Policy also accused their conservative opponents of endangering the achievement of lasting peace and security on the Korean Peninsula. Those on the opposite, “conservative” side of politics, by contrast, labeled the progressives “pro-North Korean” and charged them with being responsible for the continuation of a corrupt regime as well as harboring a desire to maintain the status quo, irrespective of the consequences for the wellbeing of the North Korean people. Debate in South Korea over inter-Korean relations in general, and the North Korean human rights situation in particular, remained ideologically polarized and for that reason advanced little for the remainder of “progressive” rule.

South Korean civil society and North Korean human rights

As in the political realm, South Korean civil society is divided along political and ideological lines. Debate over how to deal with the North Korean human rights question divided civil society actors between those who strongly supported the engagement-style politics of the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations and those who believed that change in North Korea could only come about by way of more direct intervention. Responses to the North Korean human rights issue have thus developed in the context of a divided Peninsula that continues to grapple with the question of how to bring about eventual unification.

The “peace and reunification movement” that arose in South Korean civil society circles during the 2000s was closely linked with the progressive governments of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun and their policies of unification-directed engagement. Groups involved in the movement included the Center for Peace and Disarmament, People’s Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (Ch’amyŏ Yŏndae – PSPD), Peace Network (Pyŏnhwa Network) and Lawyers for a Democratic Society (Minbyŏn). The movement argued that securing peace and security on the Korean Peninsula required peaceful rather than antagonistic
methods. The position of the peace movement, and the powerful NGOs that were associated with it, was that public debate over North Korean human rights would harm inter-Korean relations and that the government's "engagement" approach offered the best venue for progress. In this context, to be an advocate of a tougher "human rights" dialogue with North Korea was to be "anti-peace." In response to the North Korean famine of the late 1990s, the peace movement stepped in, providing broad-based humanitarian support. Lee Tae-ho of the NGO PSPD argued that the peace movement played a key mediation role at a time when South Korea was still reassessing its identity vis-à-vis North Korea in a social context that was no longer amenable to outwardly political, state-led, anti-North Korean discourse:

Through diverse methods of contact with North Korea, [peace movement activists] became civilian experts on North Korean society and acted as multi-structured messengers between the North and South Korean governments and the civilian society, and started to establish themselves as rational mediators providing rational advice to the international society and as agents for resolving tensions.

(Lee Tae-ho 2003)

On the other side of the political spectrum, the South Korean "new right" arose to fill what it saw as a lacuna in South Korean politics with the perceived shift of both mainstream and civil society politics towards the left. It was initiated by a combination of young conservatives and former progressive human rights activists, who were concerned by the new political paradigm and the binary relationship that had developed ("peace" versus "human rights"), but were hesitant to associate themselves directly with the GNP, which still had strong ties to its authoritarian past.

At a time when public opinion in South Korea overwhelmingly favored engagement with North Korea via the Sunshine Policy, the arguments of these activists were marginalized as they challenged what they believed to be a policy of appeasement. For the new right, promoting an alternative approach to inter-Korean relations was thus a particularly defining feature of their political agenda.

The Network for North Korean Democracy and Human Rights (NKnet) was founded in late 1999 as a "new right," single-issue, North Korean human rights NGO by former political dissident, Han Ki-hong. A progressive human rights activist in the 1980s, Han broke away from the progressive side of politics in the 1990s. The mission statement of NKnet describes the rationale behind this move:

[w]hile taking pride in the achievements of that struggle to establish democratic institutions in South Korea, we have publicly stated our regret for our mistaken view during the 1980s that North Korea represented the better economic and political system ... NKnet, therefore, strongly supports the modern achievements of mankind, namely individual human rights, democracy and the free market system.11
The online news hub, *DailyNK*, is associated with *NKnet* and seeks to provide an alternative source of information on life in North Korea by reporting directly from the source. During the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations, it worked on building up a strong relationship with the defector community and is now a widely read source for breaking news "on the ground" in North Korea. North Korea's most high profile defector, Hwang Changyop -- known as the architect of North Korea's leading Juche philosophy -- was also closely associated with *DailyNK* and *NKnet* up till his death in 2010, providing political commentary through a regular (Korean language) column on the website.\(^\text{12}\)

These groups represent two extremes in South Korea and are in no way exhaustive of the debate over North Korean human rights. They are, however, symptomatic of the highly politicized political environment in which the North Korean defectors found themselves during the Sunshine period. With encouragement from the burgeoning North Korean human rights activist community, defectors took their first steps towards developing a grassroots campaign to bring about improvement in human rights via the clearly political goal of regime change in North Korea. In a society where such issues are spoken about with hushed voices, if at all, the vocal and controversial actions of these groups have faced a series of barriers.

**North Korean defector activists**

North Korea's citizens have no capacity to express dissent, and human rights advocates around the world have attempted to shoulder some of the burden by encouraging the international community to place moral, political and economic pressure on the North Korean regime. Among these groups, South Korea-based NGOs comprised of North Korean defectors make up a small but vociferous component.\(^\text{13}\) A central challenge facing all South Korean NGOs seeking to raise awareness of the human rights situation in North Korea and influence policy in regard to inter-Korean relations has been to convince their audiences of the accuracy and legitimacy of their information sources. North Korea presents a difficult case, since cross-checking facts is largely impossible. It is in this respect that defector NGOs have played an important role, both as groups acting in concert with well-established South Korean NGOs as well as in their capacity as advocacy groups.

North Korean defector activists have presented a very real moral, social and political challenge to successive South Korean governments. While most South Koreans hold it as axiomatic that unification is a future reality, it is generally acknowledged that this process is necessarily a gradual one and inter-Korean dialogue is seen as necessary for the maintenance of a peace and security regime on the Peninsula (Lankov 2008). By advocating that Seoul adopt a more proactive stance in regard to North Korean human rights, the activities of North Korean defectors fly in the face of these widely held beliefs regarding the desirable trajectory of inter-Korean relations. Drawing upon South Korea's own rich history of human rights activism, these defectors have been aided and encouraged by South Korean civil society groups that recognize the potential of a defector activist community.
As discussed above, the ideological undertones of the North Korean human rights issue in South Korea severely limit the extent to which the wider community is receptive to the arguments of South Korean activists in favor of any policy that may negatively impact inter-Korean relations. The efforts of politically neutral NGOs notwithstanding, any group associated with the issue of North Korean human rights is exposed to accusations of conservative extremism, bias and lack of impartiality. Insofar as they cannot be drawn into debates that have their origin in the turbulent history of South Korean civil society, defectors seem to bring moral authority and a neutral stance untouched by ideology to bear upon the discussion. This led many to hope that their participation would galvanize an otherwise largely apathetic South Korean public.

Rather than galvanizing the South Korean public, however, defector-led activism proved extremely divisive, with groups calling for regime change in North Korea. While these defectors were not themselves privy to the emotional debates that informed discussion of inter-Korean relations in South Korea in the years leading up to democratization, they too have been drawn into the ideological pull exerted by this issue in the South Korean political sphere. The case studies below reveal that the groups developed strategies and rhetoric that flew in the face of the very premise of the South Korean approach to inter-Korean relations in the era of engagement.

The particular nature of defector politics is characterized by a sense of moral purpose that the activists take with them as they seek a place for their arguments in South Korea. In this sense the meaning with which they invest the concept of "human rights" needs to be examined. The defectors self-consciously employ the language of universal human rights contained in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. Here, the international standard of human rights is based on two important principles: universality and indivisibility. As universal and inalienable, human rights must be equally applied to all people everywhere. In this regard, defector activists argue, human rights are blatantly disregarded in North Korea. This is a view shared by international human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, as described above. Unlike Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, however, which adopt a stance of political neutrality, defector groups hold explicitly political goals and thus deploy tactics that seek to bring about regime change as the only desirable outcome. In contrast, groups such as Amnesty seek to pressure governments – in this case, the DPRK regime – to change those policies that violate human rights. They seek to bring about this goal through international moral pressure.

The second principle underwriting the UN Declaration is that of indivisibility and interdependence: all rights – political, civil, social, cultural and economic – are equal in importance and cannot be enjoyed in isolation. Defector activists take a clear stance on this latter principle and argue that, in the case of North Korea, economic, social and cultural rights will never be fully granted without the achievement of political and civil rights. In this case, they argue, the North Korean state's violation of UN-mandated human rights norms has delegitimized it and the international community has a moral obligation to intervene – by force, if necessary – to bring about an end to the status quo.
Having surveyed the political context in which these groups came into being, the activities of three defector NGOs will now be briefly surveyed. The recent proliferation of such groups renders a comprehensive analysis of all such activity beyond the scope of this chapter. Instead, three groups have been selected on the basis of their representative nature. They include two umbrella groups chosen to demonstrate the evolving nature of defector politics. The third NGO is Free NK Radio, arguably the most well-known of all defector groups. Both the actual and potential role of these groups will be examined alongside an examination of the reception of these groups in South Korean society. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the extent to which the main focus of these NGOs’ activities has changed over the years in response to the political reality in which they operate, accompanied by some reflections on the direction that this political activity is likely to take in the future. The panorama of defector politics is also a shifting and volatile one: defector NGOs appear and disappear from the political scene with some frequency. These three groups have been chosen for their visibility and their links to transnational activists. Free NK is one of the most high profile groups and has to some degree been vetted by the South Korean public. The two groups with which Hwang Changyŏp has been involved are umbrella organizations that have sought to represent the defector community as a whole.

**Hwang Changyŏp and the Exile Committee for North Korean Democracy (ECNKD)**

Hwang Changyŏp was the highest-ranking North Korean to defect to Seoul from Pyongyang. His defection took place when he walked into South Korea's Beijing embassy in February 1997. Hwang was an expert in Marxist-Leninist philosophy and was appointed as a lecturer at Kim Il Sung University in 1954. He began work with the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) General Secretariat in 1958 and it was around this time that he played an important role as the major architect of Juche, the DPRK’s official ideology. He took on various high profile appointments during this period and reportedly also worked as a personal tutor to Kim Jong Il (Brooke 2003).

Hwang’s arrival in Seoul was at first greeted with much enthusiasm as it provided both a unique opportunity to gain an insight into the workings of the DPRK’s inner sanctum as well as a significant political victory in the ideological battle between North and South. One foreign correspondent at the time described Hwang’s arrival as “a curious mixture of media circus and high-security operation” (Lloyd Parry 1997). Yet despite the great excitement attending Hwang’s arrival in Seoul, the inauguration of the Kim Dae-jung administration shortly thereafter meant that this “valuable insider” became more of a political liability. The commencement of the Sunshine Policy approach to inter-Korean relations rendered the government fearful of the destabilizing effect that Hwang’s suggestions for North Korea policy might have on the security situation of the Korean Peninsula. Living in relative isolation in Seoul, Hwang was hugely prolific during this time, writing a large number of books and essays, all with the same theme: the need to overthrow the North Korean regime and put an end to the policy of
 appeasement. These writings led to great frustration within the government of Kim Dae-jung, whose Sunshine Policy had been explicitly built upon the rejection of policy platforms advocating the forceful overthrow of the North Korean regime.

Conservative activists in the United States – in particular, Suzanne Scholte of the Defense Forum Foundation – began their efforts to bring Hwang Changyop to Washington in 1997. In 2003, their persistence finally paid off and the South Korean government gave permission for Hwang to leave South Korea for the US. This visit was followed in 2004 by the arrival of a number of politically active defectors who gathered on Capitol Hill for “North Korea Freedom Week” to announce the formation of the ECNKD which was to serve as an umbrella group for all North Korean defector organizations. Speaking via video feed, Hwang Changyop stated his support for the group as chairman of its Honorary Committee, arguing that the issue of North Korean human rights is not one that should be the sole concern of those on the Korean Peninsula, describing it as a “problem for the world”. Through the ECNKD, all like-minded defector groups would be enabled to “unite to work for regime change in North Korea ... and to transform North Korea into a free, democratic and prosperous nation once Kim Jong Il is gone” (Defense Forum Foundation 2004).

The creation of this exile group did not entirely come as a surprise. In the weeks leading up to Hwang’s initial visit to Washington, some supporters of the regime-change school of thought expressed their hopes that Hwang would become a unifying figure for anti-North Korean forces and form a government-in-exile along the lines of the Iraqi National Congress headed by high profile Iraqi defector Ahmed Chalabi. Douglas Shin, a Korean-American pastor, told the LA Times that, though the idea was still a nascent one, “what we are talking about is something that could function as a transitory government when North Korea collapses” (Demick 2003).

The ECNKD declared itself to have four main goals: To expand the “anti-Kim” force within North Korea; to enlighten the North Korean people, primarily through radio broadcasts and the distribution of radios; to form an international united front against Kim Jong Il (as the options available to those inside North Korea are perceived to be extremely limited) and to prepare North Korean defectors in South Korea as the new leaders of a free and democratic North Korea (Defense Forum Foundation 2004).

Committee for Democratization of North Korea

The North Korean defector community, however, is itself a divided one and the ECNKD ultimately had limited success in bringing the disparate defector-led NGOs together in any meaningful manner. One key defector later suggested that the main causes of the group’s gradual disappearance from the political scene were personality clashes and a lack of desire among defectors to take over the leadership role. The Committee for Democratization of North Korea was thus founded in November 2007, this time in Seoul, and was intended to take up where the ECNKD had left off.
Most non-defector NGOs involved in the issue of North Korean human rights have over the years become careful to avoid explicit mention of regime change. This includes groups based in the United States, which initially adopted this more aggressive, pro-regime change vocabulary but have subsequently tempered their language due to the difficulties it created for conducting transnational activities with domestic South Korean NGOs. The defector community, however, has declined to take this more cautious, conciliatory approach and has stayed true to the self-declared mission of Hwang Changyŏp who, in his first official address to the South Korean media, insisted: “Unification must be achieved. As the first step to that, the present North Korean regime must collapse so that the North can move to reform and opening” (Federation of American Scientists 1997). In this respect, the declared aims of the new Committee appear strikingly similar to those of the former ECNKD. These goals include promoting greater awareness of human rights and democracy and proactive support for anti-Kim Jong Il forces in North Korea.

Despite these apparent similarities, the disbanding of the ECNKD and establishment of the Committee for Democratization was more than a symbolic rebranding activity. An important difference in the approaches of the two umbrella groups was the decision of the Exile Committee to reduce its transnational cooperation. It has thus endeavored to largely limit its networking activities to South Korean civil society. In this way the NGO has been able to focus more of its energies on the promotion of awareness of the North Korean human rights situation inside South Korea. This change in emphasis is neatly summarized in the group’s fourth goal, expressed as the desire to “unveil pro-North Korea leftist forces in South Korea” (Sung Jeong-jae 2007). This last aim speaks directly to the frustration felt by North Korean human rights advocates in the South at the fact that some on the progressive left – so pivotal in bringing about the democratization of South Korea in the 1980s – remain wedded to Cold War era ideology.

**Free NK Radio – Kim Sŏngmin**

Kim Sŏngmin, the founder of Free NK Radio, was motivated to leave North Korea in 1996 as a result of the information he acquired while working for the North Korean military. His main function within the Korean People’s Army was monitoring foreign radio broadcasts. In this capacity, he quickly learned of the reality of the world outside his country. Kim recounts that he became increasingly suspicious of the information that the North Korean regime provided its population via its education system and propaganda activities. “I found out North Korea was not the best socialist country in the world, but the most backward undemocratic country in the world,” Kim Sŏngmin told the US’s National Endowment for Democracy, “it was a total shock” (National Endowment for Democracy 2007). After defecting to the South, Kim founded Free NK Radio in 2004 in order to further his firm belief that the best way to help the North Korean people is through the provision of information. This, he argues, is more important than food, for it is with information that “human rights thoughts will begin to grow.”
As of 2006, Kim Sŏngmin’s eight-man radio station began broadcasting directly into North Korea for one hour per day via shortwave radio. Broadcasting times were carefully chosen in order to best reflect time-slots in which the North Korean government would be least likely to block radio waves. Thus, the broadcasts were conducted between 7–7:30pm as well as 2–2:30am. The content of the programs varied. Some were outwardly political, such as lectures by Hwang Changyŏp. At other times, members of the North Korean defector community shared their own experiences: their flight from North Korea, the trip through China and, finally, life in South Korea. Another initiative is “Letters from America”. Ordinary American citizens based in the United States - usually made aware of the situation through church-based activists - write “letters” to the North Korean people, which are in turn read out by the broadcasters. The aim of this latter activity, according to one American activist working closely with Kim Sŏngmin, is to “spread the truth about our country [the US] and our values and our concern for North Koreans.” Letters include prayers, expressions of solidarity and basic information about life in the United States. As the following example shows, the content of such letters is often quite simplistic and aims to convince the North Korean people that, contrary to the omnipresent, state-sanctioned anti-American propaganda, Americans are in fact capable of compassion:

Hello, My name is Sandra and I live ... not far from the Capital of America, Washington DC. I just want you to know that I am thinking about you all the time. God blessed me with three sons and ... I cannot imagine how hard it is for these mothers who do not have enough food to give their children that they love so much. My heart aches when I think about this and sometimes I cry. You probably think this is silly because I do not know you and I live on the other side of the world. But dear people in North Korea, you need to know this is how Americans think ...  

Ha Tae-kyung, an activist and radio broadcaster, argues that the defector broadcasting that is transmitted directly into North Korea is a highly effective form of advocacy as it allows North Koreans in Seoul to directly address their fellow countrymen back in North Korea. While broadcasters such as “Voice of America” and “Radio Free Asia” have long broadcast their programs into North Korea, many argue that defector radio has a higher potential impact. The dialect, intonation and style of speaking used by the North Korean broadcasters is familiar to anyone who may be listening within the DPRK, adding authenticity to content that is likely to be quite shocking for its target audience. While reliable surveys of the North Korean population are impossible to conduct, estimations of audience size and broadcast impact are taken from surveys of North Korean defector and refugee communities. In 2006, the Korean Press Foundation surveyed just over 300 North Koreans who had recently arrived in Seoul. Of these, 13 (4.27 percent) had listened to foreign shortwave radio broadcasts (Ha Tae-kyung 2002).

More than any other defector group, Free NK Radio has attracted vocal criticism from the South Korean public. By its very nature it is a public, highly visible organization. In 2005, the North Korean regime directly requested that the South
Korean government put an end to the activities of Free NK Radio. Staff at the broadcaster reported threats delivered by telephone and in the mail, vandalism and protests in front of their office. They were eventually forced to pack up their operation and move to the outskirts of Seoul. Opponents of the activities of Free NK Radio believe that such work contravenes the spirit of engagement-directed policies, undermines the achievements of inter-Korean dialogue and ultimately presents a threat to the peace and security of the North Korean Peninsula. According to these groups, the broadcasts represent a regression to the behavior exhibited by the two Korean governments at the height of Cold War hostility. At a press conference, one such group, the Unification Alliance for the 6.15 Joint Declaration and Peace (T'ongil yŏndae), argued that:

Through intra-Korean military talks in which the North and South agreed to suspend slandering broadcasts aimed at one another, the mood of intra-Korean reconciliation and cooperation is building. Despite this, however, Free North Korea Radio is sending forth broadcasts that run counter to this.
(Digital Chosun Ilbo 2004)

Speaking for themselves

In the “era of engagement” under the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations, defector activists strove to carve a space for themselves within the sensitive political environment of South Korea. As the case studies presented here have shown, defector NGOs in this period shifted their attention away from “educating the South Korean public” as a means of influencing South Korean policy-making directly and instead came to focus on two main areas: leadership training and radio broadcasting.

Leadership training initiatives were born of the idea of forming a government-in-exile, which has found voice in the two umbrella groups set up with the aid of US-based human rights and democracy activists. This idea of a government-in-exile is specifically intended to prepare North Koreans for the eventuality of an open, democratic North Korea and has received increasing attention in the wider South Korean public of recent years, attracting the support, not only of NGOs and churches, but also of a wide range of academics and think tanks. Those involved in this activity argued that a new generation of educated North Koreans, well versed in international norms of democracy and human rights, are crucial to the sustainability of a North Korea led by North Koreans. Leadership preparation workshops, human rights education and democracy promotion training are all finding a place within defector communities in preparation for an eventual collapse of the North Korean regime.

The experiences of North Korean defector activists are a harbinger of the increasing complexity of the system of interfaces between the two Koreas. This particular point of contact is an especially difficult one as it touches upon many of the sensitivities that have developed within South Korea with regards to its northern neighbor. Even more than the nuclear issue, the question of how South Korea should deal with human rights violations in North Korea directly
challenges South Korean discourse regarding the nation's northern “brothers and sisters.” Concern over these violations sits uncomfortably with competing anxieties regarding the maintenance of economic wellbeing, which would be directly threatened by the weakening of the North Korean regime.

The approach taken by North Korean defector groups has neither enamored them to the South Korean public nor allowed for smooth communication or information exchange at the interface. At first depending heavily on the advice of their US supporters, defector-run NGOs quickly lost any semblance of taking a fresh, innovative approach free of ideological shackles. Rather, the extreme, hard-line stance taken by these organizations has meant that their positions are largely unintelligible to the stable, peaceful and democratic society that emerged from the Sunshine Policy. The thought of returning to the antagonistic hostility of Cold War era inter-Korean relations is anathema to the majority of the South Korean population.

The inauguration of the conservative Lee Myung-bak government in 2008 brought optimism to many South Korean activists who believed that it would pave the way for greater participation in the policy-making process among defectors. So far, however, the changes have been minor and the South Korean government has not gone to any great lengths to bring the DPRK regime to task over the issue of North Korean human rights. Rather, as the twin crises of 2010 – the sinking of the Ch’ŏn’an and the shelling of Yŏn’p’yong island – have shown, a policy that demands greater reciprocity has not been received warmly in Pyongyang. It seems, however, that the issue of North Korean human rights is becoming a more acceptable subject of conversation within South Korea, particularly among the younger generation. While no longer a taboo issue, however, it is still considered highly sensitive in political terms. The process of change, it seems, is a slow one.

Since the election of the Lee government, defector activists have sought to influence public debate through more direct political action. In 2008, Lee Ae Ran was the first North Korean defector to win nomination to run for a seat in the National Assembly. In April 2012, another activist, Cho Myung Chul, won election to the National Assembly with the ruling New Frontier Party (formerly GNP). He ran on a platform that stressed the human rights situation of North Koreans in Seoul, as well as those remaining behind in North Korea and his election was widely read as a sign that these issues were gradually emerging from the periphery of South Korean political debate (Song Sang-ho 2012).

Some argue that the optimism that was associated with a change in South Korea’s political establishment is an indication that, by themselves, defector activists have little capacity to influence policy. Rather, the receptivity of their activism relies directly on a sympathetic governing body. This conclusion, however, is overly simplistic and fails to take into account the important groundwork laid by defector groups and others in their endeavor to bring about a shift in South Korean political discourse. Were it not for the persistent efforts of South Korea’s “North Korean human rights” community, the issue of human rights violations in the ever-reclusive hermit state would have remained off the agenda completely. Defector groups have played an important role in this outcome and continue to make their presence felt on the South Korean political scene.
Notes

1 An appropriate term for describing former North Koreans has been the subject of much debate and governments have variously used “new settler” (saet’omin, since 2004), “refugee” (t’albukcha) and, since 2009, “North Korean defectors” (pukhan it’al chumin). While the use of the English word “defectors” has clearly political connotations, it is the term that is most often used by defectors within the North Korean human rights community when referring to themselves in English. As an act of self-reference, this is in itself meaningful and it is for this reason that I use the term “defector” in this paper. See also E. Bidet on the denomination of North Koreans living in the South.

2 The number of North Koreans who have resettled in the South has risen from under 1,000 in 1998 to more than 20,000 in 2011. The activists studied in this paper are a small minority among this group.

3 Data for this chapter was collected through approximately 20 interviews (either directly with the defector activists or indirectly, with individuals who worked with defector NGOs) that took place between 2006 and 2008. These interviews were conducted either in English or, in the case of one defector activist, through a translator. The information collated from these interviews was then triangulated with a range of secondary sources such as websites, scholarly articles and news reports. There are a number of sensitivities that must be taken into account when conducting interviews with defectors, most notably around questions of anonymity. To protect anonymity, all personal interviews are referenced anonymously, with the exception of one—the defector Kim Sŏngmin. In this case, he has made these comments on public record and is happy to have them attributed. The approach to information collection was primarily inductive and revolved around semi-structured interviews, as well as some participant-observer research. Given the quickly evolving political scene in South Korea, in particular in the areas of North Korean human rights activism and defector politics, the groups chosen for interview and investigation are not exhaustive, but rather meant to be indicative of certain broad trends.

4 The North Korean famine of the mid-1990s resulted in a large outflow of refugees into neighboring Chinese border provinces. While many human rights organizations had long had concerns about conditions inside the DPRK, these defectors brought with them myriad tales of systematic human rights violations, labor camps for dissenters and cruel policies aimed at preventing the inflow of information into this tightly controlled society.

5 Sources of information documenting the extent of human rights violations inside the DPRK provide details of the dire economic, social and political conditions faced by the citizens of this closed, secretive state. The two main sources for this information are the direct testimonies of North Korean defectors, on the one hand, and reports generated by a plethora of NGOs, on the other. (See Amnesty International 2004; Human Rights Watch 2002; Chubb 2010.)

6 Translated from the original: “L’interface coréenne, si elle existe, constitue donc une zone de rupture forte suscitant des types de contacts extrêmement complexes, mais peu d’échanges directs”.


8 The 2000 Pyongyang inter-Korean summit brought the leaders of the two countries together for the first time.

9 Unification Minister Jeong Se-hyun, for example, commemorated the one-year anniversary of Roh Moo-hyun’s inauguration by publishing a letter in The Korea Times, where he defended the progress of inter-Korean relations under the Roh Moo-hyun government. This is a task that would normally be undertaken by the incumbent President during his annual address to the nation (Jeong Se-hyun 2004).
In February 2012, the GNP was renamed the "New Frontier Party" (Saemuri-dang). Available at http://nknet.org/eng/intro/intro01.html?PHPSESSID=5e909bfe257a3l436b0f30d57cf29543 [last accessed August 2011].

The column remains on the website, and can be accessed here: [last accessed August 31, Peni 2011]: http://www.dailynk.com/english/sub_list.php?caId=nk02200

The majority of North Koreans who have settled in Seoul are not politically active and do not necessarily consider themselves "defectors" in the way this community does. Rather than getting involved in political activity, most North Koreans in Seoul concentrate their energies on the difficult transition that settlement in South Korea entails. Those who do choose to engage in human rights advocacy tend to feel themselves to have a moral obligation to their fellow North Korean citizens left behind in the DPRK (see also Bidet's chapter in this volume).

Details surrounding the reasons behind Hwang's apparent silencing by the South Korean government are unclear and reports on this matter often conflicting. For an idea of the absence of consensus regarding the relationship between Hwang and the Kim Dae-jung government, see the following series of newspaper articles: (The Wall Street Journal 2002; Brooke 2003; Kaplan 2003).

Personal Interview. Seoul: July 2006
Hereafter referred to as the Committee.
Personal Interview. Seoul: July 2006
Personal Interview. Seoul: July 2006
Personal Interview. Seoul: July 2006
Personal Correspondence. November 2008
Name changed to protect anonymity.
Available at http://puritanfan.wordpress.com/2008/10/03/north-korea-suzanne-scholte/ [Last accessed May 27, 2009].

As an example of this, the Seoul-based NGO Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights has conducted a "Leadership Education" program since 2005. (http://eng.nkhumanrights.or.kr/action/04.htm).

Personal Interview. Seoul: March 2008
Personal Interview. Seoul: March 2008