

# DAILY NK

## Why North Korean human rights still matter

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If you've ever read North Korean state media, listened to its diplomats, or been subject to its apologists' rants on social media, you know that they fancy themselves experts on human rights.

Specifically, they consider themselves well-versed in the human rights violations of Japan, right-of-center administrations in South Korea, and especially the United States. Faced with any moral objections to the North's behavior, they reply by asking why the criticism isn't directed elsewhere, such as the US record on race relations, torture and the invasion of other countries.

One could hardly be blamed for refusing to engage with such arguments – North Korea's (and, increasingly, China's) social justice warriors are SJWs of convenience, with little actual interest in racial disparities in US policing and its prison system; they merely deploy them a la crucifixes for warding off the *nosferatu* of human rights critiques. (It's no wonder; calls by a DPRK or PRC regime supporter for comprehensive police/prison reform in the US would surely redound upon their own systems.)

So, the argument for a prioritization of North Korean human rights is instead typically aimed at those not on the regime's side, such as the apathetic, those who believe the country can be coaxed into reforms via economic engagement, or those who prioritize denuclearization. The perspectives of those who reject any insinuation of wrongdoing by Pyongyang's part, and who would rather fixate on the shortcomings in the US health care system are generally considered not worth the time.

Some arguments, though, cut a little deeper. Noam Chomsky and Glenn Greenwald, for instance, have prioritized human rights/civil liberties reform in their own countries, and cast this emphasis as a patriotic duty. In the aftermath of the Iraq War, there was also a not-unjustified concern that criticism of another country's domestic affairs could be a pretext for invasion, especially if its relations with Washington were generally hostile.

In the interests of building a broader coalition on North Korean human rights, and amplifying the voices of those who've survived the North's systematic attacks on its people's liberties – such arguments can and should be addressed.

For starters, the “why North Korea?” line of argument frequently comes with an assumption that the regime's critics are right of center, at least as the US political system would define it. Some are, certainly, but get to know those active in the field and you'll find they come from diverse backgrounds, from liberal Democratic Party supporters to democratic socialists to Cato Institute alums who generally reject voting. In fact, in recent years, as Donald Trump has become the Republican Party's dominant voice and attempted summit diplomacy with Kim Jong Un, some former Republican critics of the Pyongyang regime find themselves politically homeless.

Secondly, criticism of North Korea and of the US (or its allies) is not an either/or proposition. Just ask Human Rights Watch, which has had much to say about the US, and in its own words “prioritize(s) issues affecting vulnerable populations, especially those that are likely to have difficulty vindicating their rights through the political process or in the courts, such as the poor, racial, ethnic and religious minorities, prisoners, immigrants, and children.”

Regarding North Korea? HRW notes how the regime “operates secretive prison camps where perceived opponents of the government are sent to face torture, starvation rations, and forced labor. Fear of collective punishment is used to silence dissent.”

Regarding the US, Amnesty International is devastating in its assessment of the present administration's policies toward the most vulnerable, from immigrants to LGBTI community, to its own critics. As for North Korea? Amnesty says: “Widespread and systematic controls over the daily lives of people and frequent pressing of the public into (labor) mobilizations severely affected the enjoyment of human rights.”

The same can be said for Reporters Without Borders, whose reports on declining freedom of the press in the US predate the Trump administration, and which consistently places North Korea at or near the bottom of its global rankings.

Thirdly, the Korean Peninsula lies at a critical nexus in international relations. The Korean Peninsula was, of course, divided against its will in the Cold War, halved by the forces of international communism and liberal democracy. While communism has since fallen into history's dustbin, new international battle lines have been drawn, now with nationalist illiberalism standing opposite the liberals, consistently downplaying the human rights of individuals in favor of collective national goals.

The sincerely held views of many in America, South Korea, and elsewhere that this standoff can be averted on the Korean Peninsula, and that the people of the two Koreas can come to a reconciliation in the absence of a US presence there, unfortunately have no basis. A multiparty, constitutional democracy and a totalitarian despotism that sacrifices all ideals – even socialist

ones – for the posterity of a single family and its loyalists cannot coexist, not when they claim authority over the same territory.

Such disparate systems simply cannot share power, and which one triumphs may well be a barometer of wider global trends.

Finally – and I suspect this is the point many have been waiting for – North Korea’s crimes against humanity are of a scale unmatched in the modern world. Amnesty has placed it in “a category of its own,” language echoed by International Christian Concern and by the UN commission of inquiry into the subject. As recent protests in the US have demonstrated, American society has failed its own people in some very real (and very bipartisan) ways, and unfortunately minorities have suffered the most.

But even if one were to treat, for example, America’s prison system conditions and its police as a problem on par with North Korea’s misdeeds (not that they should), the US has an outlet for discussing them. Politicians who have supported mistaken efforts to lower crime do change their tune in response to public pressure. Police can face consequences for overstepping their authority. The wrongfully convicted can be freed and compensated for their suffering.

North Korea lacks even these imperfect mechanisms.

With negotiations with the US having failed to bear fruit for either side, North Korea now appears to have increasingly thrown in its lot with China. Beijing may have little patience for the North’s nuclear program and consider its economic system backward, but is in no position to criticize its prison camps or inability to tolerate free speech. As the lines harden between such illiberal nationalism and liberal democracy, which at least makes a flawed effort to enforce its people’s liberties, human rights should be at the forefront of the liberal side’s argument.

Along the way, we may just make better countries for ourselves.