

House Foreign Affairs Committee

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing on

THE STATE OF CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS IN THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA:

IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS ON THE PENINSULA

April 15, 2021 - 10:00 a.m.

Virtual, via WebEx

Statement of Inho Lee

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Republic of Korea

Congressman Chris Smith, Congressman James McGovern, and other members and staff of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission,

I would like to begin by expressing my sincere appreciation for your decision to address the issue of civil and political rights in the Republic of Korea, and for inviting me to testify.

As a citizen of the Republic of Korea, I feel deeply pained and ashamed that my own country has again emerged as the subject of friendly concern in the United States, Korea's foremost ally. This hearing is a continued expression of the same spirit of human solidarity and determination to safeguard the cause of freedom that inspired Americans some seventy years ago to sacrifice their lives to save a newly born liberal democratic country and continues to cement our alliance.

Testifying against my government in a foreign setting, I run the risk of being branded an "American stooge" by some vociferous critics. I accepted the invitation because I recognize with alarm that the state of civil and political rights in my country is not what it appears to be on the surface. Without timely attention and strategic assistance from friendly neighbors sharing a commitment to freedom and democracy, the 50 million people living in South Korea may be lulled by the tempting slogan of "peace with North Korea at any cost." This would set us on a path certain to bring about a sudden decimation of South Koreans' human rights through an unprepared merging with the nuclear-armed but oppressed and starving North Koreans.

I do not think that any country can or should intervene in purely internal affairs of another but believe that when freedom and democracy are threatened everywhere in the world as now, sharing reliable information and pulling all the available resources globally together is vital to the sustenance of our common cause.

Just as communism was collapsing in Russia and Europe, in the early 1990s, the Republic of Korea, with its successes at both economic rise and political democratization, emerged as the model country to be emulated

and living proof of the superiority of the free democratic system of governance.

Four years ago, Korea again drew the attention of the whole world by impeaching the first woman president the new democracy had proudly elected. The sensational development, christened as the “candlelight revolution” by its promoters, was hailed by the press as proof of the robustness of democracy at work in Korea. Inside Korea, however, it took less than two years before many thoughtful citizens, including some who had participated in the candlelight protest against President Park Geun-hye, began to wonder if they had not made a grave mistake in staking high hopes on Moon Jae-in’s promise to create “a country that no one has experienced before.” Persons with vivid memories of the Korean war, especially, are now fearful that the country is headed for populist totalitarianism and that the very survival of the Republic as an independent country is threatened by intense pressure from an increasingly arrogant China and a nuclear-armed, but abjectly poor, North Korea.

However, such pessimistic voices, rarely catch the ears of outsiders because no major South Korean media channel was free enough to give space to views directly opposed to the official government position and the loud populist current. The aura emanating from the “mandate of the candle” was at first so strong that anyone daring to criticize the politics of the Moon government was likely to bring upon themselves, if not an official reprisal, the wrath of a modern Korean equivalent of the Red Guard.

If one is to understand the peculiarities informing the current civil and political rights situation in the Republic of Korea, it is necessary to understand that the impeachment of President Park was a revolutionary coup d’etat,” not a normal change of presidential administrations. What the vast majority of the candle-holding crowd expected was an apology from or resignation of the woman president about whom they felt disappointed and ashamed because of the scandal involving her wardrobe manager. The outcome of the candlelight demonstrations, however, was handing over of supreme power to a man who openly denies the historical fact that the country of which he became president was and still is an anti-communist liberal democratic republic launched in 1948. Characteristically, when President Moon visited North Korea in 2018, he stood before Kim Jong-un and a cheering North Korean crowd calling himself not the “President of the Republic of Korea” but the “President of the southern side.”

With the hindsight of five years, many Koreans now suspect that the intent of Moon Jae-in’s ruling circle was from the beginning not the elevation of Korea’s liberal democracy to a higher level as the majority of those who had voted for him expected but rather its systematic undermining. Moon’s government, however, was not so candid about the hidden intention behind their radical undertaking as some of its ideological advocates were. Anti-corruption, economic justice, people’s rights over the presidential power, peace at any cost, clean environment were unobjectionably attractive slogans held up as the “mandate of the candle,” while two former Presidents –Park Geun-hye and Lee Myong-bak, a former Chief Justice – Yang Sung-tae, three former chiefs of the National Intelligence Service(NIS) – Nam Jae-jun, Lee Byong-kee, Lee Byong-ho, and heads of many large business corporations starting with Lee Jae-yong of Samsung were thrown into prison. Nuclear power plants, considered to be the safest and economically most competitive in the world, were ordered to be dismantled. It was a sort of revolutionary euphoria, in which the media and civil society alike played the chorus, and no one dared to object to the sudden overturning.

Moon Jae-in won the presidential election by promising to cut down on what he termed the “imperial power” of the presidency. Once in power, however, he moved in just the opposite direction. Power concentrated in his Blue House. Besides the former top leaders accused of high crime, over one hundred lesser figures have also been arrested or brought to trial under charges which, with rare exceptions, amounted to little more than having faithfully served the previous government with its anti-communist thrust. Almost everyone who had been appointed to top posts in any government or semi-governmental organization, especially the major broadcasting

corporations such as KBS and MBC, was hounded out of his or her position. Many individuals chose to commit suicide instead of having their honor and family destroyed.

The positions thus vacated were filled promptly with persons most of whom belonged to a few specific far-leftist circles since their university years. The most notable case was the appointment of Im Jong-suk as chief of the presidential administration. Im had been a prominent leader of the pro-North underground student circle, the National Liberation faction, which trained its members to worship the founder of North Korea's Kim Il-sung dynasty as the true embodiment of Korea's national spirit. To them, the Republic of Korea was little more than an American colony that should not have been recognized as an independent country.

After four years of Moon's radical populist politics, the Republic of Korea remains a free democratic country in the sense that elections are regularly held. Despite the profuse democratic verbiage, however, all the accepted procedural norms of policymaking and appointments have been discarded. Huge corruption scandals continue to erupt and often end up with ill-explained and under-investigated suicides of prominent personages. There is increasing, pervasive fear of unexpected blows to come, whether from the political, economic, or social direction. South Korea has become sharply divided into pro-Moon and anti-Moon camps, and people talk in hushed voices even among close friends.

The most comprehensive loss suffered by the entire nation is the right to reliable information and freedom to communicate honestly with their government and with each other. The vast majority of older citizens still regard liberal democracy, the market economy, and the ROK-US alliance to be the three pillars buttressing their country but that is at odds with the pro-North and pro-Chinese direction in which the Moon government is headed. The "sovereign people" have become objects of manipulation through constant propaganda and, during the election season especially, outright bribery as both taxes and national debt keep rising sharply. Artful control of the mass media and cultural, and educational venues are hallmarks of the Moon government earning the name "theater state." Even YouTube channels cannot escape government interference.

The next touchstone of democracy to go was equality before the law and fair trial. As more and more courts are headed by judges drawn from specific formerly dissident circles, a double standard in court judgments has become prevalent. President Moon had set up five criteria to be used when making governmental appointments but none of his ministerial appointees met them. If the same stringent legal and moral criteria used in prosecuting the officials of the former governments were to be applied to Moon's people, most of them would now be sitting in prison.

Korea's general public woke up to the danger president Moon represented when he insisted on appointing as Minister of Justice Cho Kuk, his Blue House counsel and unrepentant former member of a revolutionary circle, even though he and his wife were facing serious moral and legal charges. Massive anti-Moon demonstrations began to take place. Resistance to Moon's increasingly arbitrary exercise of power grew even among his erstwhile supporters, including, notably, Attorney General Yoon Seok-young and Inspector General Choi Jae-hyung, both Moon's own appointees.

The Moon government, however, shows no sign of relenting. Instead, using the virus pandemic as an excuse to put down any resistance movement, and emboldened by the electoral victory by which the ruling party secured a surprising 3/5 majority in April 2020, it began openly to exhibit its anti-liberal ideological color and arrogance typical of one-party dictatorships. The government party started to churn out packet after packet of new laws designed to put an effective end to what remained of civil rights and economic freedoms. The ousted President Park was given the final sentence of 22 years of imprisonment and a fine and indemnity payment amounting to over 20 million dollars and the head of Samsung was again imprisoned although no clear evidence

of a crime was found against either of them.

Of these new enactments detrimental to the cause of freedom, the first to catch the attention of this commission seems to be the law criminalizing the sending of information balloons to North Korea. It is only a cap put on the Moon government's steady refusal to endorse the UN efforts to intervene in North Korea's human rights situation and reflects his determination not to do anything against the wishes of Kim Jong-un, even on matters affecting the life and death of Korean citizens including refugees from the North. Equally, if not more, ominous in its long-term implications is the law which makes it a high crime to say anything different from the ruling party's preferred version about the Gwangju uprising of 1980. Officially enshrined as the "5.18 democracy movement," the tragic incident is seen by many witnesses and researchers as a student movement for democracy which was exacerbated into a massive anti-state insurrection through undercover incitement and participation of North Korean agents. This new law is tantamount to a death sentence to academic freedom as well as political freedom of discussion. The idea that historical truth can be regulated by law spells an end to rational thinking on the part of the lawmakers - a frightening prospect.

Another particularly dreadful act established the Corruption Investigation Office for High-ranking Officials (CIO). Under the direct control of the President, it will have an exclusive, irrevocable right to investigate and prosecute any high-ranking official charged with a misdemeanor, including judges and military generals. Officially promoted as an organ designed to root out corruption and abuse of power, in the context of current partisan politics, CIO will give the president unlimited power to shield his close associates from impartial investigation and prosecution. Still another law deprives Korea's national security agency, the NIS, of the right to probe into pro-communist activities and makes it possible for the agents of North Korean and Chinese communist parties to operate in Korea without any fear of being caught – this when South Koreans are forbidden even to send information balloons to North Korea.

The landslide victory of the opposition party candidates in the by-election held on April 7, this year, show that the Korean voters finally woke up from the populist spell cast by the Moon government and started to reclaim lost territory. Yet winning back mayoral posts in Seoul and Busan does not bring about a reduction in the number of the National Assembly seats occupied by the ruling party. The governing oligarchy will only redouble their effort to solidify their grip on the country and keep making new laws to strengthen their quasi-socialist one-party dictatorship and better cater to the demands made by North Korea and China.

Threats to freedom and democracy are easy to perceive when they come from persons donning military uniforms as in Myanmar, but much more difficult to detect and forestall when instigated by persons wearing the mantle of democracy fighters. I have to admit ruefully that the Republic of Korea, despite its economic superiority, lost the war of propaganda and agitation to North Korea. I sincerely hope that the United States will awaken to the alarming situation in the Republic of Korea today. It would be a disaster not only for my country but for the United States as well, if the flower of freedom, so carefully nourished by America for so many years at such great expense, were to fall under the control of its foes. If a country of 50 million is left to slide into a totalitarian society from being a vibrant liberal democracy in this pivotal corner of the global community, nowhere will freedom remain safe and secure.

I thank you for your attention.