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Applying the Human Rights Question in Legislative Relations: My Experience with the National Assembly of the Republic of Korea and the International Parliamentarians' Coalition for North Korean Refugees and Human Rights

The Dickey Center for International Understanding gave me the opportunity to work under the Honorable Hwang Woo-Yea, a member of the 17th National Assembly of the Republic of Korea, as well as Secretary General of the Grand National Party of South Korea. I served for twelve weeks, from June to September of 2007, as Mr. Hwang's legislative assistant and more importantly, as one of three coordinators of the Fourth General Meeting of the International Parliamentarians' Coalition for North Korean Refugees and Human Rights (IPCNKR), of which he is the Standing Co-Chairman.

IPCNKR consists of 111 members from 36 different countries who hope to use their offices to end the brutal practice of repatriating North Korean refugees. The annual three-day conference, however, is an entirely volunteer-run affair. I was shocked at the low level of participation from the parliamentarians, and initially felt overwhelmed by the scope of the task that had been entrusted to me and two older staff members. Mr. Hwang pleaded with me to stay an additional three weeks in Korea and help put together this conference. After seeing that the IPCNKR conference would need all the help it could get, I agreed and decided to become the third conference co-coordinator.

The hardest task about organizing a conference with attendees who are Members of Parliament is actually inviting them to come. Despite the fact that each invited member – there were over 100 – was guaranteed a room at the Shilla Hotel and a free plane ticket to Korea, I had to brace myself for the disinterested response I received for most of the times I contacted a parliamentarian’s secretary. The simplest acknowledgment of IPCNKR’s invitation, much less an official decline, was rare. This invitation process required a lot of energy, as one had to be prepared for rejection and indifference in the majority of cases, regardless of the individual’s parliamentary role in his or her country’s human rights.

I had to familiarize myself with the dialogue and norms of communication among parliamentarians, so that I could most effectively persuade them to attend the conference. In addition, I arranged personal meetings between Assemblyman Hwang and various ambassadors of Royal Embassies in Seoul so that they could save time by discussing the most effective references and resources to contact. Understandably, many of the countries I invited expressed their lack of incentive to come to the IPCNKR conference. In fact, I received a slightly chilly response from Botswana’s legislature about their reasons for opting out of the event. They cited the small size of their Parliament, the pervasive problems in their own country, and the higher effectiveness of their efforts toward “more universally applicable” human rights organizations under the UN, instead of ones focused on East Asia. I left my internship feeling slightly disillusioned by the lack of resources given to organizations like IPCNKR. I quickly realized that a powerful politician like Mr. Hwang could have taken one-tenth of the time and energy used by the IPCNKR Secretariat to still receive a much higher, more positive response rate. My internship helped me to recognize the necessity of power, money, and political connections in improving conditions

internationally, even if those conditions involve something as fundamental as an individual's human rights.

Shockingly, one of the biggest obstacles of the conference did not come from a foreign legislature, nor did it come from the Chinese or North Korean governments. One might hope that the fundamentality of human rights as an issue would discount party politics from the smooth operation of all organizations trying to aid North Korea, but this was certainly not the case in the South Korean National Assembly. At the time of my internship, South Korea's executive branch was dominated by the Uri Party, which is the rival political party of Mr. Hwang's Grand National Party. The upcoming summit between the leaders of North and South Korea exacerbated this antagonistic situation between South Korea's opposing parties. South Korea's stance toward North Korea has historically been based on the Sunshine Policy, which discourages criticism of the North Korean regime in order to ease inter-peninsular tensions and open the avenues of participation and cooperation. The ideological basis for the International Parliamentarians' Coalition for North Korean Refugees' Human Rights is openly critical of the DPRK government, and so Uri Party members within the executive and legislative branches used various ways of hampering IPCNKR's funds and operations.

For example, the original requirement to obtain funding from the National Assembly was to secure the attendance of parliamentarians from at least 35 different countries. This quantitative requirement was suddenly raised, however, to obtaining membership from parliamentarians of 45 different countries. Thankfully, the IPCNKR Secretariat was able to secure the extra memberships. The second obstacle, however, took place at the actual conference and was something we could not alter. Most of the IPCNKR

members only chose to come to the conference in Seoul, South Korea because of the involvement of United States representatives. The U.S. members of Congress, however, could only stay for a few morning hours of the conference, as the South Korean executive branch had suddenly invited the Congress members to an exclusive tour of the North/South Korean border's mountain range during the IPCNKR conference. The U.S. legislators could not refuse the kind offer, and this necessitated a sudden reconstruction of the IPCNKR schedule, causing much inconvenience and speculation about America's flaky attitude and South Korea's divided stance on North Korean human rights.

Truth be told, there is little concern by politicians and legislators for the cause of human rights, especially human rights in a country as isolated and militarily threatening as North Korea. I had my own reservations about Mr. Hwang, who I admire and respect tremendously for his no-nonsense, uncorrupt career as a twelve-term politician. I could see, however, that the conference was, above all other things, a useful political platform for the South Korean participating parliamentarians, including Hwang himself. My hardships and triumphs at a unique organization such as IPCNKR helped me to better understand the complex, oftentimes disguised relationship between NGOs (non-government organizations), GOs (government organizations), national governments, parliamentarians, and of course, North Korean citizens and defectors.

As a result, I had to constantly remind myself of the plight of the North Korean refugees in order to fight forgetting what had originally brought me to Korea in the first place. It's so easy to feel disconnected from the same oppressed people you are trying to reach out to, due to the logistical details and practical, business side of running an official event for their sake. An international parliamentary convention of such great magnitude

can only successfully come to fruition, however, if the individuals involved remain rooted in their selfless desire to speak on this voiceless national community's behalf.

Thankfully, there was significant improvement in IPCNKR participation this year, as the delegate attendance count jumped from 29 delegates representing 6 countries at the 3rd General Meeting, to 60 members representing 11 countries at the 4th General Meeting. The long and arduous process of inviting attendees was finally completed as a strong, unified coalition – of all types of international community members – was formed at the Fourth General Assembly: parliamentarians, NGO leaders, foreign ambassadors, testimony-giving defectors, and the press. I was deeply encouraged by this increased level of participation in IPCNKR, which to me signifies the global community's growing desire to safeguard human rights in North Korea. It helped me to envision the cooperation between NGO leaders and members of parliament developing and guiding society's interests toward tremendous positive change for human rights in North Korea. I hope that in the next couple of years, I can find and wholeheartedly fulfill my role in the diverse but unified group of people committed to improving human rights in North Korea.