



## **Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing**

### **North Korean Human Rights Movement: Current Prospects and Obstacles**

**Tuesday, April 28, 2026**

**12:30 p.m. – 2:30 p.m.**

**2118 Rayburn House Office Building**

**Co-Chair James P. McGovern**

#### **As prepared for delivery**

Good morning. I welcome the witnesses and those attending today's hearing.

The human rights situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) is among the worst in the world. It routinely ranks at or near the bottom by organizations that assess political and press freedoms. Its dynastic hyper-authoritarian regime allows zero space for the exercise of fundamental rights. There is no independent judiciary and no ability for the people to change their government. Severe restrictions on access make it extremely difficult to get an accurate look at conditions inside the country.

So the audience may be surprised to hear that the focus of the testimony is not on human rights in North Korea, but on South Korea.

Not that there is anything wrong with that. The people of South Korea are equally entitled to enjoy internationally recognized human rights as anyone. Their government is no less worthy of scrutiny than any other. The mandate of this Commission is global.

The fact that a country is a treaty ally of the United States, such as South Korea, Turkey or Hungary, or a major non-NATO ally, such as Pakistan, Israel or Saudi Arabia, has not and should not exclude it from the agenda of this Commission.

There are legitimate concerns about human rights in South Korea. Human Rights Watch's 2026 annual report notes that:

“President Lee’s administration has weakened policies that promote human rights in North Korea, prioritizing dialogue and engagement with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. In September, the Ministry of National Defense cut radio broadcasts on news and pop culture into North Korea, severing a vital source of outside information for North Korean listeners. In August, the Ministry of Unification canceled its annual report on human rights conditions in North Korea. Though a 2023 Constitutional Court verdict struck down a law that banned sending leaflets to North Korea, starting in June 2025 the government began cracking down on activists who sent balloons with leaflets and other materials into North Korea under a disasters and safety law that prevents unauthorized access to border regions.”

Other human rights concerns include discrimination against women and girls, LGBTQ people, older people, migrants, people with disabilities, and people of low socioeconomic status.

We must also acknowledge that the Republic of Korea is a constitutional democracy. The political system allows for redress. People are free to debate and discuss these issues through a free press and a vibrant civil society. Unlike people across the DMZ, they have the ability to petition for changes in policy and demand accountability.

The people of South Korea demonstrated they are capable of doing just that. In December 2024, then-President Yoon Suk Yeol declared martial law, outlawing political activity and ordering military censorship of all media. Had he succeeded, it would have been *disastrous* for rule of law and human rights, including for the freedoms of expression and assembly. Fortunately, it failed. Yoon was found guilty on insurrection charges and sentenced to life in prison.

The resilience of the South Korean people in a moment of crisis to their democracy, much like the people of Brazil, is something to be admired. The system worked. Those engaged in insurrection have been held accountable. They are in prison, rather than out of jail and free to try again.

If Yoon had succeeded, the tone of today's hearing would be much different.

Thankfully, the people of South Korea retain the ability, through the democratic process and open society, to demand that their government make changes.

The people of North Korea do not have this ability. They live in a closed society. Thus it falls to others, including Americans, to speak for those whose voices are silenced, and to provide tools for advocacy.

I fear we are falling short.

The North Korea Human Rights Policy Act has not been reauthorized since 2018. The House Foreign Affairs Committee has not marked up the bill this Congress.

President Trump has not appointed a Special Envoy for North Korea Human Rights, just as he failed to do during his first term.

The State Department cut the content of the Country Report on Human Rights for North Korea by more than half.

The Trump Administration is trying to kill broadcasting of independent information into closed societies. Radio Free Asia's Korean language service, which employed around 50 people before the President's axe, is reportedly down to four people.

If the question today is whether a government is doing enough to provide independent information to North Koreans and support human rights advocacy, for the sake of the North Korean people, it seems curiously incomplete to focus solely the South Korean government and not our own.

I hope that today's witnesses will address how Congress can use its own tools to reorient our government to the promotion of human rights in North Korea and around the world.

Thank you.