

# report PUBLIC JUSTICE

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## A Champion of Justice in Korea

by  
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Woo-Yea Hwang, LL.D., is beginning his third-term as a member of South Korea's National Assembly. Warm, outgoing, and always ready with an engaging smile, he has become one of Korea's leading human rights advocates, particularly with regard to orphans, the handicapped, religious freedom, and the treatment of refugees from North Korea. Mr. Hwang now serves as chairman of the National Assembly Human Rights Forum.

The dire situation of North Korean refugees inspired Mr. Hwang to introduce legislation that would reform the current policy of South Korea. His bill calls for the immediate issuance of South Korean passports to refugees in order to ensure safe passage into South Korea. The bill also provides for the immediate protection of a refugee prior to an investigation of his or her case, for financial support of NGOs that assist refugees, and for the lengthening to ten years of education for North Korean refugees in order that they might become self-sufficient.

The plight of North Korean refugees to China who are forcibly sent back to North Korea to face torture inspired Hwang to go further than the National Assembly Human Rights Forum was willing to go. In 2003, he helped establish the International Parliamentarians' Coalition for North Korean Refugees and Human Rights (IPCNKR). The founding member nations included South Korea, Japan, the United States, Great Britain, and Mongolia. The following year, the Korean National Assembly hosted a conference with parliamentarians from Asian nations involved in North Korean refugee issues. This event sparked the ire of the Chinese government. After the conference, a counselor at the Chinese Embassy in Seoul called Assemblyman Hwang's office, demanding that he stop his activity on the refugee issue (*The Korea Times*, 12/13/04). The incident led to a diplomatic quarrel between the two governments. South Korean Foreign Minister Ki-Moon Ban called China's threat a "break of diplomatic etiquette" (*The Korea Times*, 12/14/04), leading U.S. Senator Sam Brownback of Kansas to call it "an abuse of its authority." (*The Korea Times*, 12/15/04).

In early August, 2005, Tokyo hosted a General Meeting of the IPCNKR, attended by more than 40 lawmakers from South Korea, Mongolia, Japan, and the U.S. and 70 representatives from 13 different NGO's. In his opening speech, Hwang explained how the IPCNKR had helped coordinate the passage of the U.S. North Korean Human Rights Act as well as the introduction of similar legislation in South Korea and Japan. Because human rights supersede the authority of the state, Hwang argued, "humanitarian aid must be pursued in order to promote and protect the human rights of the North Korean people," and this should be done without regard to whether such assistance serves the political purposes of any of the cooperating nations. In his speech Hwang said that China, as a signatory of the U.N. Convention on Refugees, must respect the human rights of the North Korean refugees. He then issued a statement that called for the cessation of the forced repatriation of North Korean refugees, a statement that was read in front of the Chinese Embassy in Washington, D.C. on August 20 by Suzanne Scholte, Vice Chairman of the North Korea Freedom Coalition.

After returning to Seoul, Hwang led both the National Assembly Human Rights Forum and IPCNKR to submit a formal letter of protest to China's Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing, censuring China for its forceful repatriation to North Korea of seven refugees in Yantai, China, and demanding that China release 11 refugees in Qingdao into the safe custody of the local South Korean consulate. The refugees in Qingdao have since been safely delivered to the South Korean consular officials.

Thankfully, there is evidence that the influence of legislators from the IPCNKR countries has had a global effect. The U.N. Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in North Korea called the North Koreans in China "refugees" for the first time, saying they deserved protection on the terms of the 1951 U.N. Convention on Refugees. This challenges the claim of China that North Korean exiles are "economic migrants." In addition, last November, the U.N. General Assembly endorsed a resolution introduced by the European Union demanding that North Korean human rights abuses be addressed.

What motivates Woo-Yea Hwang in his work as a National Assemblyman and in his pursuit of human rights? It is, he says, a matter of Christian service arising from his commitment to God. His vision for Christian political service is rooted in four key biblical principles: faith, justice, peace, and joy. It is with this inspiration that Hwang established the Institute of Christian Politics in Korea soon after he entered the National Assembly.

His concern to be of public service and not primarily a conduit of benefits and privileges for local constituents or his political party has led to the unique situation of being elected chairman of the National Assembly Education Committee even though he is a member of the primary opposition party, the Grand National Party (GNP).

As a legislator, Hwang has worked not only for human rights abroad but for the protection of key institutions and practices that generate a high valuation of human life and dignity. He has, for example, introduced the *Hyodo* (Korean for filial duty) bill at the National Assembly, to encourage respect and honor of one's parents at a time when materialism and individualism are leading to the fragmentation of society.

Whether he is introducing legislation, presiding over the National Assembly Education Committee, or defending the human rights abroad, Woo-Yea Hwang pursues public policy with a passion for justice. Working from a platform whose four pillars are faith, justice, peace, and joy, Hwang is working to chart a Christian-democratic course in a country where both democracy and Christianity are relatively new.<sup>1</sup>

[Mr. Choi served as foreign affairs assistant to Woo-Yea Hwang in Seoul in the autumn of 2005. A Korean-American from Long Island, New York, Choi is a Fellow with the National Flagship Language Initiative, studying domestic politics and advanced Korean language at Korea University.]

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>On the influence of Christianity in the founding of the Republic of Korea, see Kenneth M. Wells, *New God, New Nation: Protestants and Self-Reconstruction Nationalism in Korea, 1896-1937* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991). Well known today for sending Christian missionaries throughout the world, South Korea has the largest proportion (though still a minority) of Christians of any East Asian nation.

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