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This paper investigates motivating factors and reasoning on why North Korean defectors are seen in South Korean politics with a focus from what is apparent to what is implied – from political framework to cultural and personal viewpoints. This research paper finds that first, North Korean defectors' political participation has been shaped by the polarized political climate in South Korea. Additionally, North Korean defectors' political participation is believed to be behaviors from their old belief system established in North Korea. Lastly, North Korean defectors are motivated by altruism as they are 'survivors'.

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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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*NORTH KOREAN DEFECTORS' POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN SOUTH KOREA*

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULLFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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## Executive Summary

**Title:** North Korean Defectors' Political Participation in South Korea

**Author:** Ms. Lisa Kim, Center for Army Analysis (CAA)

**Thesis:** North Korean defectors' political participation is for self-interest, survival, and current and future participation is and will continue to be acts of altruism.

**Discussion:** North Korean defectors in South Korea needs to be understood within political, social, and cultural contexts due to the uniqueness of the Korean Peninsula situation. Since the early 1950s, Korea has remained divided. South Korea has evolved to be an industrialized democratic state, while North Korea has struggled to survive under the authoritarian dictatorship. Both high society members' political exiles and ordinary escapes resulted in a significant increase in defectors settling in South Korea. This new group presents diversity concerning gender, education, status, and experience from North Korea. As the defectors integrate into a new society, it is within the political domain where their integration efforts are seen the most. The diversified defectors over time may reveal different or more practical interests, aims, and means in future political participation as a way to fight for support and resources to meet their ever-changing needs.

**Conclusion:** This research paper finds that first, North Korean defectors' political participation has been shaped by the polarized political climate in South Korea. The prevailing conservative party agenda has reserved seats for elite defectors in the National Assembly. Additionally, North Korean defectors' political participation is believed to be behaviors from their old belief system established in North Korea. The middle-aged and older generation of defectors were accustomed to obey the political authority and to regard political participation as a duty to the nation. Lastly but most importantly, North Korean defectors are motivated by altruism as they are 'survivors'; it is the unique experience and determination of the defectors that can sustain themselves in the South Korean political domain with a focus on the female population which makes up the majority of the defector population in South Korea; they continue to voice their support for people in North Korea as they believe the strongest voice comes from those have lived to tell the tale.

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THE OPINIONS AND CONCLUSIONS EXPRESSED HEREIN ARE THOSE OF THE INDIVIDUAL STUDENT AUTHOR AND DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT THE VIEWS OF EITHER THE MARINE CORPS COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE OR ANY OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCY. REFERENCES TO THIS STUDY SHOULD INCLUDE THE FOREGOING STATEMENT.

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## Introduction

North Korea is a country of dictatorship. This country has been frequently discussed in the context of an oppressive regime and its strategic nuclear missiles, which is reflected by the current US posture in the global settings against a rogue state. However, what is overlooked and forgotten is people living under the Kim regime in Korea, one of the most isolated countries where the people are fundamentally stripped of basic rights, and public executions are common.

North Korea has been ruled by the Kim family for three generations. People in North Korea are required to fully show devotion to the ruler as they are controlled by total government surveillance and a spy network. North Korea's media is state-controlled, which is widely used for praising the Kim regime. There is no freedom of religion. People can be jailed for anything without a fair trial from trying to defect to watching a soap drama produced by South Korea. <sup>1</sup>People are subject to forced and unpaid labor at any given time.

Over the years, North Korean people have escaped the country, risking their lives. South Korea has been a popular destination for many because the two Koreas share the same language and history; they feel they can be in closer proximity to their used-to-be home. By policy, the South Korean government welcomes refugees from North Korea and grants them South Korean citizenship upon arrival. The current defection population in South Korea is estimated to be over 330,000<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Nathan Thompson. "North Korea, Where Watching a Soap Opera is Apparently Punishable by Death." September 24, 2015. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/bjkmjd/north-korea-where-watching-a-soap-opera-is-apparently-punishable-by-death>.

<sup>2</sup> Republic of Korea Ministry of Unification. "South-North Relations, Data & Statistics, Policy on North Korean Defectors." Accessed January, 2021. [https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng\\_unikorea/relations/statistics/defectors/](https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/relations/statistics/defectors/).

It is within the political arena where the integration efforts can be observed as more defectors are introduced into South Korean society. Political participation in this paper is loosely examined to include direct policymaking in a political institution, a wide variety of phenomena, activities, and political and social practices.

Why are North Korean defectors seen in South Korean political domain? Why do they actively participate? This research question begins with the recent increase of defector populations in South Korea. As the settlement population increased, the current defector group presents diversity concerning education, age, and experience from North Korea. The diversified defectors may suggest different or more practical interests, aims, and means for their current and future political participation.

North Korean defectors' political participation is for self-interest, survival, and current and future participation is and will continue to be acts of altruism. In order to address reasons and motivating factors for the political participation by North Korean defectors in South Korea, this paper observes a migration trend from the past to present— from high members' political exiles to under-privileged escapees. Also, this paper will shift a focus from what is apparent to what is implied – from political framework to cultural and personal viewpoints.

## **One. Conservative Party Platform**

First, North Korean defectors' political participation is shaped by a growing disconnect between the two Koreas and a polarized political climate in South Korea.

### Korea Divided.

Today Korea stands divided. This setting gives a clear identity to people from the north. Since the Korean War, each country has adopted different ideologies, implementing policies that have manifested two very different political, cultural, economic, and social outcomes. From 1910 to 1945, Korea was ruled and occupied by the Emperor of Japan. After Japan's surrender in World War II, Korea became free from the war efforts orchestrated under the Japanese occupation and earned independence, but soon Korea became advised and occupied by the United States Armed Forces to the south and by the Soviet Union to the north at the 38th parallel. At this time, Korea became the focal point between the Soviet Union, China, and Japan. Koreans soon found themselves in war again on their own soil. The northern part of the Korean Peninsula shares a border with the Soviet Union and China where it received shipments of weapons, food, fuel, and general aid during the occupation and communist influence of the Soviets. The North Korean communist army's invasion of the American-occupied south sparked three years of the Korean War (1950-1953), which brought little or no gain for both sides. Without the peace treaty, the Korean Peninsula has remained divided. North Korea has survived under the third generation of the Kim dictatorship whereas South Korea has thrived and become an industrialized democratic state.

## North Korean Defectors or People from the North

The term “Defector” reflects North Koreans’ determination for escaping the regime. In terms of a historic description of North Korean defectors, Chung (2008) argues that North Korean people are characterized based on the time of arrival in South Korea. During the Cold War period, most of the defectors were military officers or diplomats. These political exiles were beneficial to the South Korean government to secure the logic of the Cold War.<sup>3</sup> They were given resettlement money and housing, which promised them a lifestyle that was similar to or better than what they had in North Korea. However, from the post-Cold War period to the present, more North Korean people escaped. The term, “defector” is a politically charged Cold War term.<sup>4</sup> Kim’s article discovers a few terms used in the past such as the “North’s defected soldiers,” “Defected ethnic North Koreans,” “North Korean refugees,” and “Defected North Korean residents.”<sup>5</sup> Kim claims “migrants from the North” is a more feasible and widely accepted term; then he argues that “arrival” to the South should be understood in a more ideological than social context. Similarly, Son’s article mentions the perception of North Korean defectors in South Korean’s society had changed from “veteran heroes” to “refugee” and from “refugee” to “migrant” over time.<sup>6</sup> There are still many other terms to name the North Koreans in South Korea, yet interestingly, Chung finds that the North Korean defectors preferred “defector”

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<sup>3</sup> Byung-Ho Chung. "Between Defector and Migrant: Identities and Strategies of North Koreans in South Korea." *Korean Studies* 32, (2008): 1-27. <http://www.jstor.org.lomc.idm.oclc.org/stable/23718929>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Sung Kyung Kim. "Defector," "Refugee," Or "Migrant"? North Korean Settlers in South Korea's Changing Social Discourse." *North Korean Review* 8, no. 2 (2012): 94-110. <http://www.jstor.org.lomc.idm.oclc.org/stable/43910315>.

<sup>6</sup> Sarah A Son. "Identity, Security and the Nation: Understanding the South Korean Response to North Korean Defectors." *Null* 17, no. 2 (2016): 171-184. doi:10.1080/14631369.2016.1151236. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2016.1151236>.

or a term that particularly describes their status as “escapees” from the North regime; therefore, they declined any other new names.

### North Korean Defectors’ Political Participation in Divided Korea

South Korean politics is highly polarized when it comes to North Korea. On the Korean Peninsula, technically the war is still ongoing between the North and South. This tension resonates in the current South Korean political scene. Based on the stance towards the North, conflict exists between “two Souths - progressives and rightist-conservatives”.<sup>7</sup>

The previous two administrations, President Lee Myung Bak and Park Keun Hye from 2008 and 2014 maintained hostility and skepticism towards the peace talk engagement with Pyongyang. The conservative party they came from had a long-held traditional policy of opposition to North Korea in fortifying deterrence posture. In South Korea, policies and attitudes towards the north seem to sit in the political party line. Given the complex historical situation, South Korean politics is often tested in three major areas – sentiment towards the North, strengthening the relationship with the US for national security, and relationship with Japan. Both the Lee and Park administrations did little to deviate from the party’s deterrence policy towards the North. They advocated strengthening the US-ROK alliance. Park’s new agenda, trust-based foreign policy towards the North was found to be nothing but a very abstract term that still had a deep root in the old party policy. The two administrations pushed more US-ROK military exercises and increased combined defense capabilities including the deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) in defense against ballistic missiles from the north. Also, in 2016, Park’s administration suddenly shut down the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC) that was

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<sup>7</sup> Hee Chang and Hannes Mosler. "Namnamgaldüŋ - Partisan Media Framing of Political Polarization in South Korea." *Korea Observer* no. 50 (2019): p 331. 10.29152/KOIKS.2019.50.3.331.

originally established with South Korean and foreign investment, only a few miles from the DMZ in North Korea. No one expected this closure; this sudden shutdown was a symbol of cutting economic ties with the North, which was forced by the ROK-Japan-US alliance to validate the country within the “coalitional bargaining framework”, and the public heavily criticized the Park’s administration.<sup>8</sup>

Ironically, this environment invites North Korean defectors into the South Korean political domain, especially for those who used to hold high-ranking positions under the Kim regime, ‘regime loyalists’. The conservative party has welcomed elite members of North Korean defectors who publicly criticized the North Korean regime. It is believed to be one of the strategies pushed by the South Korean conservative party, which can attract and secure votes among the conservatives. From 2012 to 2016, Cho Myung Chul, who was a professor at Kim Il Sung University, served in a parliamentary seat via proportional representation. Notably, in the 2020 National Assembly election, Tae Yong-Ho, the North Korean diplomat who defected to South Korea in 2016, won a seat as a representative of a posh district in Seoul running on a conservative platform. According to Thae’s interview with National Review by Nordlinger (2019), he described himself as the current North Korean regime’s nightmare and nominated himself as a prominent critic since defection. He said he and his family had a close tie with Kim Il Sung, the grandfather of Kim Jong Eun<sup>9</sup>; he publically announced that his goal was to see the end of the North Korean regime that is “corrupt, nasty, and lying.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In Seong Kim and Hyun Koo Cho. "Shutting Down the Kaesong Industrial Complex: A “Coalitional Bargaining” Framework." *Asian Politics & Policy* 11, no. 1 (February, 2019): 80-103. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.12434>.

<sup>9</sup> Oslo Freedom Forum. "Inside the Kim Regime | Thae Yong-Ho | 2019 Oslo Freedom Forum in New York. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NUoKZPKe0HI>.

<sup>10</sup> Jay Nordlinger. "The Incredible Guts of Thae Yong-Ho - an Emissary from North Korea." July 8, 2019, 20-22.

Any discussion about North Korean people in South Korea must be understood in the blend of political, social, and cultural context due to the uniqueness of the Korean Peninsula situation. Although Korea has been divided for over seventy years, two Koreas share the same language and history. In South Korea, this division translates to polarization based on the sentiments the government and society feel towards the North. It seems that the polarization in the South politics helps elite North Korean defectors stay in the political domain; the conservative party continues to reach out and endorse them; they view themselves as valuable to the party as they are recognized based on their status in North Korea.

## Two. Old Beliefs

Second, North Korean defectors' political participation can be explained by their old belief system established in North Korea.

By examining how North Korean defectors and South Korean society perceive each other, this section draws a connection between defectors' previous experience in North Korea and their participation in the Candlelight protest in 2016.

### South Korean Society's Perspective

South Korean society struggles to embrace North Korean defectors. Nowadays, North Korean defectors are not limited to just elites and their families. More defectors have come from far less privileged groups. As lower middle-class populations from the North have increased, South Korean society has maintained skeptical viewpoints about defectors' integration efforts. Lankov describes a common perception that refugees are outsiders and have not quite adjusted to the conditions of South Korean society. Defectors have also been viewed as social and budgetary burdens on their communities.<sup>11</sup> Concerning the South Korean government's response, Lankov finds that a majority of the defectors struggle with jobs, education, crime, and social adjustment, which has led to the South Korean policy changes to address these issues. It seems that as much as North Korean defectors struggle to integrate into a new country, South Korean society has difficulties with embracing them. Some scholars warn that this struggle strongly impacts the South Korean narratives. Han's study surveys the South Korean climate towards the North

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<sup>11</sup> Andrei Lankov. "Bitter Taste of Paradise: North Korean Refugees in South Korea." *Journal of East Asian Studies* 6, no. 1 (2006): 105-137. <http://www.jstor.org.lomc.idm.oclc.org/stable/23418172>.

Korean population. Han argues that South Korean citizens are divided with two opposing views. Some South Korean citizens are reluctant to share resources and benefits, whereas some believe that the society must allocate resources separately and have policies in place for new settlers from North Korea recognizing them as a disadvantaged group.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Eschborn and Apel's article presents that the South Korean government (referring to policies from the ruling conservative party) lacks compassion that can greatly benefit the North Korean defector population.<sup>13</sup>

### North Korean Defectors' Perspective

Some North Korean defectors use their identity in order to fit into South Korean society. To understand the North Korean defectors' behaviors or desires to belong to a new society, the study by Hough & Bell presents mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. They say North Koreans living in South Korea gain social status by speaking publicly about their lives and denouncing the North Korean regime.<sup>14</sup> In doing so, they distance themselves from North Korea and align themselves with the "good" discourse of human rights (inclusion).<sup>15</sup> However, their actions reinforce a logic of exclusion, implying other North Koreans living in South Korea who prefer anonymity are "sympathizers" of the North and consequently restricting their access to social benefits and resources.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Gil-Soo Han. "'Othering' North Korean Refugees in South Korea: A Literature Review and the Concept of Nouveau-Riche Nationalism." Brisbane Qld Australia, 26 Nov 2012 → 29 Nov 2012, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Norbert Eschborn and Ines Apel. *North Korean Refugees in South Korea.; Arduous Escape and Difficult Integration*: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep10100.7>.

<sup>14</sup> Jennifer Hough and Markus Bell. "North Koreans' Public Narratives and Conditional Inclusion in South Korea." *Null* 52, no. 2 (2020): 161-181.  
doi:10.1080/14672715.2020.1740606. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2020.1740606>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.





subjected to labor and activities mobilized by North Korea's power and authority; they are programmed to obey the government system under the belief that it is their duty and virtue.<sup>22</sup>

### Pro-Park Rallies in 2016-2017

North Korean defectors' political participation in pro-Park rallies in 2016-2017 presents many limitations to be defined as a measurement of successful integration into a new democratic society. It was the first time the largest group of defectors gathered and participated in a politically sensitive protest. What was questionable is why they supported President Park and her party although the majority of South Korean citizens chose not to. Over the scandal, the ruling conservative party was split. Park loyalists struggled to sustain their power in the National Assembly, and many of them failed to get re-elected in the following election.

One possible explanation is that North Korean defectors lean onto their previous experiences and their old beliefs towards the ruling government. North Korean society is claimed as an exemplary case for subject political culture (first defined and introduced by Almond and Verba in 1963).<sup>23</sup> The relationship of the North Korean political system and people is loosely defined, and information and leadership flow downward.<sup>24</sup> People under the authoritarian Kim's regime were hardly asked to be active in civic affairs.<sup>25</sup> They were accustomed to mobilize under the order for any given political event, and diversified opinions towards the ruling power were never allowed. In fact, they were locked within the social class systems and denied

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<sup>22</sup> □□□ and □□□. "□□□□ □□□ □□□□ Subject Political Participation of North Korean Defectors." *Journal of Peace and Unification Studies* (□□□ □□) 10, no. 1 (June 22, 2018): p.327. <http://hdl.handle.net/10371/142698>.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Gabriel Abraham Almond and Sidney Verba. *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015. p.19

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

education and opportunities to build extensive knowledge. Therefore, they do not form themselves as a constitutive and critical part in any political activities.

The majority of the defectors in the pro-Park protesters turned out to be middle-aged and older who proudly identified themselves as President Park's sympathizers.<sup>26</sup> This middle-aged and older group has little motivation to integrate into South Korean society. They are not in the job market competing with South Koreans; they do not have to attend school or build a new social network. In fact, most of them receive welfare, and they tend to socialize within the group. Having no integration experience is what distinguishes this group from other age groups.<sup>27</sup> So during their settlement in South Korea, their view towards the ruling government is unlikely to change. It is inevitable to receive criticism that they are isolated, vulnerable, and easy to be recruited by power and money. One survey reveals that they blindly feel close to the South Korean society they belong to and proud of South Korea's achievements.<sup>28</sup> However, this patriotism is only limited to be the sense of belonging as they have very little knowledge or interest in North Korean defectors' resettlement policy-making in South Korea.<sup>29</sup> Later, it was revealed that the activist group, known as Parents Alliance, had a close connection to the Park administration. The group systematically organized and ushered North Korean defectors into pro-Park rallies. It is questionable whether the defectors formed their own decision to support President Park or they were mobilized under influence. One of the North Korean defector

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<sup>26</sup> Gabriel Abraham Almond and Sidney Verba. *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015. p.19

<sup>27</sup> Steven Denney and Christopher Green. "Unification in Action? the National Identity of North Korean Defector-Migrants: Insights and Implications." *Korea Economic Institute of America* (October, 2018). [http://www.keia.org/sites/default/files/publications/kei\\_aps\\_green\\_denney\\_180928.pdf](http://www.keia.org/sites/default/files/publications/kei_aps_green_denney_180928.pdf).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> □□□ and □□□. "□□□□ □□□ □□□□

Subject Political Participation of North Korean Defectors." *Journal of Peace and Unification Studies* (□□□ □□) 10, no. 1 (June 22, 2018): p.360. <http://hdl.handle.net/10371/142698>.

protesters stated "in North Korea, a president is the president until he dies. Also, he is worshiped like a god. You can't blame the president as much as you do, and if you do such, you will be executed immediately. However, in South Korea, I don't understand why people just criticize and slander the president. President Park's term is almost over, and I don't understand why people can't wait."<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, it turned out that Parents Alliance paid up to 50,000 South Korean wons (equivalent to 45 US dollars) per day for the participation.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>이재진. "탈북자는 왜 태극기 부대에 합류했을까." October 26, 2018. <http://www.mediatoday.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=145184>.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

### Three. Altruism

Third, North Korean defectors' political voice especially towards people in North Korea is altruistic.

This section demonstrates that it is the experience of the escape and settlement in a new society that shaped North Korean defectors to be more sympathetic to people in North Korea; further, their choices and actions define them as altruistic.

#### Escape

What ultimately results in altruistic political participation in South Korea often starts from unpleasant experiences under the North Korean regime. Starting in the early 1990s, people in North Korea experienced a great famine, also known as the Arduous March or the March of Suffering. Several hundreds of thousands of North Korean people died (total deaths unknown). Prior to the famine, the North Korean communist party, with the help from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) beginning around the time of the Korean War, had provided food, housing, and jobs to people in North Korea. However, after the fall of the USSR, the aid gradually declined. Kim Il Sung's national "Juche" policy charged the nation to be self-reliant, but coupled with North Korea's already poor farming conditions, the famine severely reduced food production; thus, government aid to people was eventually eliminated. The population starved to death in the hundreds of thousands, eating grass and tree bark to stay alive.<sup>32</sup> To avoid possible riots due to the outrage and suffering, the government responded with public executions. Such terrible experiences made some North Koreans doubt whether it was

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<sup>32</sup> Liz Sly. "N. Koreans Surviving on Leaves, Tree Bark." *Chicago Tribune*, March 19, 1997. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1997-03-19-9703190061-story.html>.

them or the greatest leader of North Korea that could determine their fate. Famine started breaking a link between the regime and people in North Korea. Some naturally chose to become independent from government controls. This independent spirit started to show in the grassroots marketization of the North Korean economy.

With the collapse of the central command economy, small private black markets emerged by underprivileged social groups. Among them, it was North Korean women who were put at the forefront of grassroots marketization. Men in North Korea were tied in government-controlled positions whereas women were thrown into a situation where they had to resort to survival entrepreneurship.<sup>33</sup> Some North Korean women put in their best efforts to survive as vendor merchants, which often required being creative; also, they took risks by crossing the border with China for illegal trade. This experience opened up an opportunity for experiencing foreign information censored by the regime. As North Korea wanted to remain isolated from the international community with travel ban policies that enforced the anti-emigration and anti-immigration movement, some North Koreans took the risk to seek refuge outside of its borders. They made their own fate by choosing to escape the country as it often meant risking their lives and putting their families in danger back home.

### Journey to Freedom

It was North Korean women defectors who faced threats of death, torture, and rape but persevered in hopes of finding freedom. Many North Korean women escaped the country believing that they could make money in China to send back as foreign remittances to care for their families in North Korea. Unfortunately, according to testimonies of North Korean

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<sup>33</sup> Andrei Lankov and Seok-hyang Kim. "North Korean Market Vendors: The Rise of Grassroots Capitalists in a Post-Stalinist Society." *Pacific Affairs* 81, no. 1 (2008): 53-72. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40377482>.

defectors, especially women who crossed the border into China were subject to be kidnapped and sold to Chinese men in need.<sup>34</sup> Often, some survived and escaped again into third countries that have a diplomatic relationship with the South Korean government. The journey into South Korea meant careful and risky navigation through China in order to get to Vietnam, Mongolia, or Laos. Currently, China does not grant refugee status to escapees from North Korea. In fact, the Chinese military and policy work together with the North Korean regime to capture illegal North Korean immigrants in China. As the escapees are captured, they are directly sent back to political prison camps in North Korea. A typical jail time in prison camp is known to be up to several years facing harsh labor under inhumane conditions.

Among North Korean settlers in South Korea, the female population is higher than the male population (seventy percent versus thirty percent).<sup>35</sup> One of the reasons is believed to be simply for survival. Many North Korean women escaped a patriarchal culture on their own where mistreatment and discrimination against women were the norms. Not for themselves, some women simply crossed the river to China alone, just to feed their children. They were vulnerable in China with the fear to be sent back to North Korea and only to be found locked in a prison camp; but, many endured extreme situations in China and took the courage to escape again to get to South Korea. North Korean women defectors are survivors. They made their own destiny as they refused to be victimized.

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<sup>34</sup> Olivia Enos and Yujin Kim. "Deceived and Sold: How China Treats North Korean Female Defectors." October 2, 2019.

<sup>35</sup> Republic of Korea Ministry of Unification. "South-North Relations, Data & Statistics, Policy on North Korean Defectors." Accessed January, 2021. [https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng\\_unikorea/relations/statistics/defectors/](https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/relations/statistics/defectors/).

## Altruism

It is North Korean defectors' testimonies that bring the truth of the conditions of people in North Korea. Some of the defectors in South Korea candidly speak about their personal experiences of fear, mistreatment, and survival. These personal narratives not only educate the public, but also they are messages of hope and encouragement for people living in North Korea. Thus, some of the North Korean defectors' political participation can be understood in the context of altruism. One study finds that altruism and social identification are noticeable factors in political participation, and it suggests they increase such participation.<sup>36</sup> This is significant as it counters the common belief that self-interest was the dominant and common reason for political participation. Then, what defines North Korean defectors to be altruistic is based on actions they choose – choices they make among all available options whether they are acts out of concern for others and not the self.<sup>37</sup>

Most North Korean defectors-led organizations voice against the ignorance in South Korean society. There was a survey on unification that should be treated as an indicator of South Korean citizens' ignorant attitude towards the North. The majority of the defector group in South Korea has expressed that Korean unification is necessary, and they would like to see it happen in their lifetime.<sup>38</sup> However, South Korean society responded differently. In the 1990s, over 80

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<sup>36</sup> James H. Fowler and Cindy D. Kam. "Beyond the Self: Social Identity, Altruism, and Political Participation ." *Journal of Politics* 69, no. 3 (June 28, 2007). <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1111/j.1468-2508.2007.00577.x>.

<sup>37</sup> Monroe, Kristen Renwick. *The Heart of Altruism: Perceptions of a Common Humanity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998. doi:10.1515/9781400821921.

<sup>38</sup> "Beyond Parallel - Bringing TRANSPARENCY and UNDERSTANDING to Korean Unification." . Accessed 3/4/, 2021. <https://beyondparallel.csis.org/a-view-inside-north-korea/>.

percent of the South Korean citizens thought that unification was necessary.<sup>39</sup> About twenty years later, the number dropped to less than 30 percent.<sup>40</sup>

In 2019, two sailors fled into the South Korean sea. Although they desperately expressed a need and desire to defect into the South, the Moon administration declined and hurried to send them back to the North in a few days.<sup>41</sup> This was recorded as the first official repatriation to North Korea. Unfortunately, this 2019 incident did not earn much media attention. At that time both North and South Korea were careful and sensitive to each other as they prepared for a possible US-North Korea meet-up in the Korean Peninsula. In June 2019, President Trump met with Kim Jong Un at the DMZ. As people were tuned into this breaking news, it was the North Korean defectors who continued to be a voice for the two sailors who were sent back to North Korea. Among them, Park Ji Hyun, the North Korean defector and human rights activist, made a petition statement towards the South Korean government. She noted that South Korea violated Article 2 of the South Korean constitution on the prevention of torture.<sup>42</sup> She expressed the two sailors should not have been treated as criminals by the South Korean government based on the principle of presumption of innocence.<sup>43</sup> She stated no law existed that could be exercised to force the two sailors to be repatriated to North Korea.<sup>44</sup>

North Korean defectors act in politically sensitive areas. Park Sang Hak the activist, who is known for his work sending balloons to North Korea for the past fifteen years, is a defector

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<sup>39</sup> Wikipedia. "Korean Reunification." . Accessed March 4, 2021. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Korean\\_reunification#cite\\_note-CBC-30](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Korean_reunification#cite_note-CBC-30).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Daryum Ji. "Two North Korean Sailors Rescued on Saturday Will Defect, South Korea Says- Remaining Two were Repatriated Via Panmunjom on Wednesday Morning." (June 18, 2019). <https://www.nknews.org/2019/06/two-north-korean-sailors-rescued-on-saturday-will-defect-south-korea-says/>.

<sup>42</sup> News Magazine Chicago. ""文정부의 북한선원 강제복송을 규탄한다“ 美·英 탈북민 인터뷰." . [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N3AfuBMm\\_j0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N3AfuBMm_j0).

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

himself. A typical balloon contains not only leaflets but also food, DVDs or USBs of South Korean romance drama and music, medicine, and US dollar bills. Park and his organization claim that the reason to send balloons to the North is to reach the inner city population in North Korea. They believe information is a key to awaken people in North Korea where any outside information is censored. The South Korean government filed a legal complaint against leaflet-sending defector groups; moreover, the government passed a new anti-North Korea leaflet bill to ban such activity in December 2020. The government responded that the leaflets from South to North created more tension than benefits to the inter-Korean relationship; also the law was designed to protect the lives of South Korean citizens in border regions. In opposition to the government, activist Park Sang Hak and his organization believe the new bill is a violation of the freedom of speech; they stated they would not abide by the law and continue to send leaflets to the North.<sup>45</sup>

The population of defectors from the North grew in South Korea. According to the Republic of Korea Ministry of Unification, “(t)he total number of North Korean defectors entering South Korea by 2020 was 33,752.”<sup>46</sup> The number assessed each year has shown a steep increase; however, the North Korean defector population makes up less than 0.01 percent of the total South Korean population of 51 million. Their activities are nothing but small; their voice may be unpopular in stark contrast to majority viewpoints in South Korea. They are challenged by the South Korean government that must manage a wider range of challenges with North Korea, including outright threats of violence, active missile testing, and a need for a US military

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<sup>45</sup> Hyohee Shin. "South Korea Bans Anti-North Leaflets; Defector Says He Won'T Stop." . <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-southkorea/south-korea-bans-anti-north-leaflets-defector-says-he-wont-stop-idUSKBN28O1OI>.

<sup>46</sup> Republic of Korea Ministry of Unification. "South-North Relations, Data & Statistics, Policy on North Korean Defectors." Accessed January, 2021. [https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng\\_unikorea/relations/statistics/defectors/](https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/relations/statistics/defectors/).

presence to handle the military-dominated government to the North. However, North Korean defectors continue to speak up for issues with regard to the people of North Korea because if they do not, they believe no one would.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper finds motivating factors and reasoning on why North Korean defectors are seen in South Korean politics. First, due to the current situation of the Korean Peninsula, North Korean defectors' political participation plays a vital role in the polarized political climate in South Korea. High society members' political exiles have been invited by South Korean politics, particularly with a prevailing conservative party agenda that reserved seats for elite defectors in the National Assembly.

Additionally, North Korean defectors' political participation can be explained by their old belief system established in North Korea. The current North Korean defectors in South Korea range from elite members of the Kim regime to far less privileged groups. As the defector population grew, South Korean society struggled to embrace these new settlers from the north; equally, from the North Korean defectors' side, they struggled to fit into a new society. The recent massive North Korean defectors' participation in the 2016 impeachment rally in South Korea put a highlight on the middle-aged and older generation of defectors. Their behaviors are better explained as 'subject political culture', which they learned and became accustomed to from North Korea. Having little motives to integrate into a new society, the older generation of the North Korean defectors did not simply have the opportunity to learn a new belief system where they are allowed to form their own opinion as a constitutive and critical part in any political activities in a new democratic society. Instead, they seemed to act on their old belief system established in North Korea where it was a virtue to follow the political authority and regard political participation as a duty to the nation.

Lastly, North Korean defectors are motivated by altruism and by social identity. This explanation independently supports the resiliency of North Korean defectors who made their own path by choosing to escape the dictatorship state and risking their lives. Especially the female population, which makes up the majority of the defector population in South Korea, are survivors and witnesses of human rights violations. Their unique experience and success in a new society made them more sympathetic to North Koreans. Engagement in the South Korean political domain has been challenging because their voice is unpopular and dismissed by South Korean society. Nevertheless, they refuse to be silent; they will continue to voice their support for people in North Korea because they believe that the strongest voice comes from those who have lived to tell the tale.

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