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South Korea: Will election of Dr Kim Dae-jung as President signal a new era in human rights?

Today's election of former prisoner of conscience and long-standing human rights advocate Dr Kim Dae-jung as President of the Republic of Korea (South Korea) could mark a new departure for human rights, provided his presidency upholds his election pledges and maintains a firm commitment to carry out judicial reforms, Amnesty International said today.

"Dr Kim Dae-jung's long-standing support for human rights is a good omen for South Korea," the organization said as his election was confirmed.

"We urge him to tackle South Korea's acute need for human rights reforms with determination. As a former victim he of all people should understand the need for putting human rights principles into practice."

Amnesty International believes that the economic reforms made necessary by the economic crisis in South Korea should not overshadow the need for human rights reforms. The organization is concerned in particular that prisoners of conscience should be released, the National Security Law should be thoroughly amended and that steps should be taken to eradicate torture and ill-treatment.

Amnesty International noted that Dr Kim Dae-jung has long advocated the universality of human rights and has himself supported what he described in 1995 as the "*increasing awareness of the importance of democracy and human rights among Asian peoples*".

"We hope that the commitment of President-elect Kim Dae-jung will remain a strong champion of the universality of human rights both in the region, globally and at home," Amnesty International said.

In November 1997, President-elect Kim Dae-jung pledged that he would consider measures such as the release of some, but not all, prisoners of conscience. Amnesty International hopes that these commitments will be clarified and followed through early on in his presidency, and that further action will be taken to remedy past human rights violations and prevent new ones from occurring.

Background

Dr Kim Dae-jung was subjected to human rights violations for simply peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression. He spent much of the 1970s under house arrest or in prison. During this period he was first adopted as a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International.

He was arrested in March 1976, as a prominent signatory of a "Declaration for National Democratic Salvation". He was arrested again in May 1980, just before the Kwangju Massacre, and was accused of having "instigated" agitation. He was sentenced to death in September 1980. His eldest son Kim Hong-il and his brother Kim Dae-hyun were sentenced to imprisonment at the same time, while his wife, Lee He-ho, was kept under partial house arrest.

Following widespread international protests and campaigning by international organizations, his death sentence was commuted in 1981; in 1982 he was released on a “suspended” sentence. In February 1985, he was placed under house arrest again on the day he returned from two years’ exile in the USA. House arrest and harassment continued until February 1986.
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