

SAIS | US-KOREA
2010 YEARBOOK



JOHNS HOPKINS
UNIVERSITY





SAIS | **US-KOREA**
2010 YEARBOOK

Published by the U.S.-Korea Institute at SAIS
www.uskoreainstitute.org

Copyright © 2011 by the U.S.-Korea Institute at SAIS (www.uskoreainstitute.org)
The Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University
Printed in the United States

The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of individual members of the U.S.-Korea Institute at SAIS or its Advisory Council Members.

All rights reserved, except that authorization is given herewith to academic institutions to reproduce articles herein for academic use as long as appropriate credit is given both to the authors and to this publication.

The North Korean Refugee Policy of the Lee Myung-bak Government: Nationalism and Multiculturalism

By Narae Choi

I. INTRODUCTION

There are nearly 20,000 North Korean refugees currently residing in South Korea, and that number is growing at an accelerating pace. According to a Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU) survey, however, in the midst of the Sunshine Policy between 2003 and 2005, the public perception of North Korean refugees by the South Korean population ranged from empathy to indifference. Anecdotal evidence suggests that increased tensions between the two Koreas—such as those following the *Cheonan* and Yeonpyeong Island incidents—instigate anti-North Korean sentiments that extend to North Korean refugees and are informed by Cold War-era anticommunist propaganda. On the other hand, the emphasis on Korean solidarity based on *minjok* continues to penetrate official and public discourse championing North Korean refugees and unification. Yet, how pervasive is the argument based on ethnic purity in the increasingly multiethnic cosmopolitan Korean society? How does the Korean government reconcile its unification and North Korean refugee policy based on the rhetoric of ethnic homogeneity with its campaign of embracing diversity, as Korean society struggles to adapt to the presence of *others*, North Korean refugees in particular?

This paper seeks to answer these questions. First, it will provide a short survey of differing views on North Korean refugee policy in light of increasing diversity in South Korean society. The following section will examine the ideological stance of the Lee presidency manifested in different government bodies. Based on this analysis, this paper will also make policy recommendations.

II. SHORT SURVEY OF CURRENT STATUS AND IDEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND ON ADMINISTRATIVE DESIGNATIONS OF NORTH KOREAN REFUGEES IN CONJUNCTION WITH MULTICULTURAL FAMILIES

According to the Ministry of Unification, the number of North Korean refugees entering South Korea each year has trended upward since 1998. By December 2009, cumulatively, 17,985 North Korean refugees had entered South Korea. Although North Korean refugees account for only approximately 0.037 percent of the South Korean population, their struggle to adjust to South Korean society is widely known. Jih-un Kim and Dong-jin Jang categorize such difficulties in their 2007 *Asian Perspective* article, “Aliens among Brothers? The Status and Perception of North Korean Refugees in South Korea”: economic difficulties due to lack of professional skills, language barriers, discrimination, and poor health; educational maladjustment; emotional distance from South Koreans; and severe culture shock.

On the other hand, diversity has been another factor of change in contemporary South Korean society. As of 2009, South Korea has 580,000 migrant workers, 170,000 marriage immigrants, and 110,000 immigrant children, according to the Presidential Committee on Social Cohesion. In total, there are more than 1,100,000 immigrants and foreigners in South Korea, amounting to 2.25 percent of the South Korean population. This growing multiethnic population in a historically homogeneous society has sparked interest across mass media. The process through which South Korea has transformed from an ethnically homogeneous state to its current state is well documented in Kim Hyuk-rae’s 2009 article in *Korea Observer*, “Contested Governance in Making of Multicultural Society.” According to Kim, labor shortages in the late 1980s introduced migrant workers into Korean society and despite a brief hiatus during the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997, this trend has continued to date. Moreover, Korea’s gender imbalance initiated another wave of immigration in the form of international marriages beginning in the 1980s. This trend also continues to grow, primarily between foreign women and rural farmers. Scholars, such as Yoonkyung Lee, argue that migrants and foreign brides brought changes to the South Korean identity of ethno-nationalism, as she highlights South Korea’s struggle between nationalism that led to political and economic success and the present reality that calls for a multiethnic and diverse society.

Emerging Discourse: Shift in Administrative Definition of North Korean Refugees?

In many ways, the North Korean refugee population and multicultural families (다문화가정 is a term broadly used in official and public discourse to designate immigrants and immigrant families) are two of the most important minority issues that the South Korean government has been grappling with since the 1990s. In this context, there is an emerging discourse on how to provide care and services for North Korean refugees. This section will briefly discuss the two sides of the debate: the traditional and prevailing notion of North Korean refugees as a part of Korean nation in its own special category, and the more novel view of them as a part of a broader category of social minorities.

There are two different lines of reasoning behind the opinion that North Korean refugees should be supported as and separated into their own category. The emotional response stemming from the memories of civil war and division, as well as a nationalistic “Korean solidarity” based on one Korean ethnicity, are still acute. Furthermore, North Korean refugees strongly reject being grouped into other minority groups, emphasizing the view of North Korean refugees as “blood brothers.”

On the practical side, many argue that most North Korean refugees acquire significant physical and psychological trauma as they escape North Korea, hide for years, and lose families and friends. Furthermore, they argue that unlike other social minorities and foreign-born South Korean nationals, North Korean refugees need fundamental training to cope with life in a capitalist society. Finally, they consider the North Korean refugee situation as a practice run for larger influxes of refugees and, eventually, unification.

On the other hand, those who prefer North Korean refugees to be treated as members of a broader category of minorities also have different viewpoints. Some argue that viewing North Korean refugees as brothers of one nation inevitably focuses on their inability to successfully adapt. Others point out that there’s an existing channel of similar welfare distribution and care for both North Korean refugees and multicultural families, which means additional bureaucratic overhead and waste. Why not merge and cut costs?

Where Does the South Korean Government Stand?

North Korean refugees symbolize one of the last bastions of Cold War

politics—a tangible tie to the arch-enemy-brother. But more than an artifact of the Cold War, the refugees represent a flash point in the political discourse, as their rate of entry grows and the public discourse is dominated by stories of unsuccessful resettlements. The political and social rhetoric of North Korean refugees as “blood brothers of one nation” nevertheless persists. Diversity in the South Korean society poses another layer of complication by pushing the society toward openness and diversity, and away from nationalistic rhetoric. With emerging discourse on how to treat North Korean refugees on an administrative level, how does the South Korean government form its North Korean refugee policies?

III. THE LEE MYUNG-BAK ADMINISTRATION'S STANCE AND ITS EFFECTS

The Lee Administration's Dilemma

The picture of North Korean refugee policy becomes even more complicated when it comes to the Lee Myung-bak government's framework. First, President Lee, just like any other South Korean president, faces an inherent constraint in setting the tone of North Korea-related policy: the South Korean Constitution. The Constitution's mandates are fundamentally nationalist; the preamble of the Constitution declares that “the people of Korea... [have] assumed the mission of... peaceful unification of our homeland and [have] determined to consolidate national unity with justice, humanitarianism and brotherly love.” Article 4 specifies that unification is one of South Korea's national goals, which is reemphasized in article 66, paragraph 3, as the duty of the president. Promoting “national culture” is also mentioned twice, in articles 9 and 69. If the Lee administration considers North Korean refugee policy as a subcategory of North Korea and unification policy, then it is likely to employ the same line of rhetoric, traditional and nationalist. If, however, the administration considers North Korean refugee policy as a subcategory of broader social welfare policies, then its approach may differ, seeking the framework capable of maximizing the effect of limited resources.

Regardless of the constitutional mandate, however, North Korean policy has not been the center of Lee's presidency. After two consecutive progressive presidents who championed the Sunshine Policy toward North Korea, President Lee was elected on the platform of economic revitalization of South Korea. As a result, there were only a few North Korea experts on his Presidential Transition Committee. Furthermore, it is difficult to discern the Lee government's stance

on the North Korean refugee issue from presidential speeches and briefings, for it is rarely mentioned. Therefore, the remaining method of analyzing the Lee administration's orientation is through examining the policy measures of various ministries.

In doing so, this paper has chosen to examine three (out of the 19) ministries involved in North Korean refugee support specified by article two of the Enforcement Ordinance on the Act on the Protection and Resettlement Support for the Residents Who Escaped from North Korea (대한 법률 시행령): the Presidential Committee on Social Cohesion, the Ministry of Unification, and the Ministry of Public Administration and Security. These ministries were chosen by their ideological orientations, which span from the nationalist platform to the Progressive pro-diversity platform.

Presidential Committee on Social Cohesion

The Presidential Committee on Social Cohesion (PCSC) is the youngest of the three government agencies dealing with North Korean refugee issues. It was inaugurated on December 23, 2010, following President Lee's August 15 Independence Day speech, which announced the advent of PCSC directly under the presidential purview. As noted in the *Transition Committee White Paper*, the issues of a multicultural society, migrant laborers, and North Korean refugees are grouped into the issue area of social cohesion (사회통합), which was part of President Lee's campaign pledge as well as a continuing theme.

Goh Kun, former prime minister under President Roh Moo-hyun, chairs the PCSC, which consists of four subcommittees (class, ideology, region, and generation), 48 committee members, and 120 personnel. The North Korean refugees settlement project is under the generation subcommittee, along with the generational workforce coexistence project, family-friendly workplace project, and marriage immigrant support project. According to the Republic of Korea National Budget Assembly office, the budget for PCSC increased from 2,043,000,000 *won* in 2009 to 2,734,000,000 *won* in 2010 (the sixth-largest among direct presidential committees). Although the PCSC does not have the power to enforce its decisions and findings, it facilitates dialogue between ministries and builds consensus. The PCSC's activities thus serve as an experimental venue for different ministries to voice their concerns on preexisting problems, although such concerns may never gain enough consensus to become binding legislation.

The PCSC's North Korean refugee support functions, according to its website, are the following: "discovering success stories, supporting, and correcting the negative view of North Korean refugees through public awareness campaign; coming up with unified responses from the 19 government agencies; involving regional governments' efforts." Of these functions, the supervisory role of 19 government agencies seem to be the most active, as meeting summaries show. During the first meeting of the North Korean Refugee Success Project Subcommittee on March 12, 2010, the PCSC asserted that there is a lack of cooperation among the 19 ministries as well as regional governments, implying that the PCSC's Subcommittee on North Korean refugees would serve as the place of cooperation in forthcoming months. Consequently, officials from the Ministry of Labor, Ministry of Unification, and Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, as well as other related ministries, attended most of the nine meetings held from March 12 to November 26, 2010.

The North Korean Refugee Success Project Subcommittee, however, is not the only place within the PCSC that North Korean issues are discussed. For example, Dasom alternative school is discussed both in the North Korean Refugee Success Project Subcommittee and the Foreigner and Marriage Migrant Subcommittee. Furthermore, the Foreigner and Marriage Migrant Subcommittee takes, at times, a more proactive role in consensus building on North Korean refugee issues among ministries. In the fifth meeting of the Foreigner and Marriage Migrant Support Project Subcommittee on July 5, 2010, attended by the participants from the Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Gender Equality, Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, and Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology, Kim Seung-gwon, subcommittee chair, proposed the need for centralizing multicultural family and foreigner policy under the office of the prime minister. Furthermore, he argued that North Korean refugee policy should be under the same umbrella. His reasoning was that the integration of the service system for multicultural families, foreigners, and North Korean refugees, especially on the local government level, would lead to better service to all of the recipients. The meeting's minutes note that the Ministry of Unification is opposing the integration of a support system for North Korean refugees due to the difference in systems, and so do many North Korean refugees. Such record implies that there is an underlying ministerial disagreement surrounding the North Korean refugee policy resource allocation, based on differing perspectives of North Korean refugees—whether the issue is a minority group or unification preparation.

In short, the PCSC offers a vignette into the interaction among the Lee

government's ministries and their differing views on North Korean refugees: grouping of North Korean refugees with multicultural families for practical reasons or North Korean refugee policy as a unification exercise. Furthermore, the meetings held at the PCSC as well as the virtual lack of nationalistic rhetoric or mention of unification on its website imply that although the PCSC endeavors to build consensus among ministries, it leans toward the former view, opposing the Ministry of Unification.

Ministry of Unification

The Ministry of Unification (MOU) evolved out of the 1968 National Unification Board, and officially became a ministry on February 28, 1998. Although its beginning was largely symbolic, the Ministry of Unification became more powerful as the North-South dialogue intermittently resumed in the 1960s and 70s. It reached its zenith under President Kim Dae-jung and President Roh Moo-hyun, with the construction of the Kaesong Industrial Zone and the establishment of the Mount Geumgang tour as well as the convening of historic North-South summits. The current head of the agency is Hyun In-taek, a former member of Lee's Presidential Transition Committee and the Presidential Council for Future and Vision. The MOU's 2009 budget was approximately 2 trillion *won*, of which, 83.5 billion *won* was allocated for North Korean refugee support; its 2010 overall budget is approximately 2.7 trillion *won* (see appendix).

The MOU underwent a near existential crisis under President Lee's Presidential Transition Committee, as the Transition Committee seriously considered plans to merge the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Unification, as documented in the *White Paper*. However, in the end, due to strong opposition from minority parties, the Ministry of Unification remained as an independent ministry.

The MOU experienced another shock in the wake of the 2009 North Korean nuclear crisis. North-South relations soured, and most of its main functions and projects became defunct or were downsized. It was the turning point at which the MOU began to focus its resources on North Korean refugee support, which was becoming more visible and important in South Korean society. The shift is shown in the sharp increase in 2010 North Korean refugee project-related budget, which was 30 percent larger than its 2009 budget.

The MOU's North Korean refugee support is under the purview of the Humanitarian Cooperation Bureau, along with North-South cultural exchanges,

humanitarian aid, and family reunions. According to the *2010 Practical Manual for North Korean Refugee Settlement Support* (2010북한이탈주민 정착지원 업무 실무편람) the North Korean refugee resettlement support policy is “the touchstone of [South Korea’s] will and ability for unification”; therefore, the MOU compares North Korean refugee resettlement to “a mock-trial” for unification. In order to successfully support the refugees, the MOU emphasizes the Consultative Council to Deal with Dislocated North Koreans (북한이탈주민대책협의회) to bring together the 19 government ministries and connect them with local governments and the private sector.

Unlike the PCSC, the MOU employs nationalistic rhetoric throughout its projects, according to its namesake *raison d’être*, about the preparation and execution of successful unification. MOU vice-minister, Um Chong-sik, in his *Financial News* column on October 17, 2010, described unification as “the springboard for the Korean nation’s big jump.” According to the MOU website, one of the purposes of the South-North Cooperation Fund is to contribute to national community, closely mirroring the views of President Lee. The MOU also reinforces the Lee administration’s vision of activating sociocultural exchange; harking back to the Constitution, it pledges that through exchange, we will heighten the national-community sentiment, and bring back the homogeneity of the two Koreas. Most recently, the MOU named its 3.8 million *won* project for unification planning and human capital management “South-North Community Foundation Project,” and one of the subprojects is called “national community.”

Moreover, the vice-minister’s remark summarizes how the ministry channels unification into current focus: the North Korean refugee policy. In his speech for the Volunteerism for North Korean Refugee Pledge Rally on October 14, 2009, the vice-minister argued that “North Korean refugees who share our language, culture, and history are not even getting the same attention that multicultural families and migrants of different languages, culture, and history get.”

In short, the MOU represents the traditional ethno-nationalistic values that most strongly adhere to the Constitution, and rejects the multiculturalism umbrella for North Korean refugee issues. The MOU is more closely tied to North Korean refugees and better acquainted with their concerns than any other ministry. Nevertheless, the MOU’s desire to be the near one-stop solution for North Korean refugee support suggests the ministry’s interest in maintaining the current scope and level of control over the issue is firm—fueled by the demise of yesteryear’s main projects, such as the Geumgang tour and Kaesong Industrial Zone.

Ministry of Public Administration and Safety

In 2008, President Lee Myung-bak formed the Ministry of Public Administration and Security (MOPAS) from two separate ministries formed in 1948—the Ministry of Government Administration and the Ministry of Home Affairs—as well as the Civil Service Commission, the National Emergency Planning Commission, and the national informatization strategy functions of the Ministry of Information and Communication. The current minister is Maeng Hung-kyu, a former member and spokesperson of the Grand National Party and senior secretary to the president for political affairs. MOPAS is the biggest of the three government agencies, with a 45 trillion *won* budget (see appendix) and more than 607,628 civil servants.

Of the 45 trillion *won*, the budget for North Korean refugee support is a minuscule 343 million *won*, which means that MOPAS has little responsibility regarding North Korean refugees. MOPAS, however, is not planning on remaining in a minor role. In 2010, MOPAS commissioned a comprehensive report from the New Asia Research Institute on North Korean refugee resettlement, which sampled 10 percent of the North Korean population (1,800) and conducted one-on-one and group interviews. The report was subsequently reviewed by two MOPAS officials, who concluded the following: by utilizing the recommendation from the report, the MOPAS will be able to gradually cement its position as a *de facto* future ministry of unification. If this statement reflects the general consensus within the MOPAS ranks, the bureaucratic politics surrounding North Korean refugee policies becomes even more complicated, beyond the clash of nationalistic and multicultural views.

MOPAS currently plays a small role in providing services to the North Korean refugee population. It is marginally interested in the integration of support systems for multicultural families and North Korean refugees, but does not share the PCSC's and other ministries' goals to integrate different government agencies to create a cohesive policy. Nor does it emphasize the ethno-nationalistic rhetoric of the MOU. However, MOPAS recognizes the important role that the MOU is expected to play in case of the North-South reunification. MOPAS's goal, at least according to two commentators on the NARI report, is clear: to gradually replace the MOU in order to become a more powerful player in the aftermath of unification. In short, the bureaucratic politicking surrounding the North Korean refugee issue, and by extension, unification, has already begun.

The Lee Administration's Contradictory Rhetoric

Deciphering the Lee Myung-bak administration's overarching stance on North Korean refugees by analyzing the Blue House's official statements and speeches is difficult, because the issue is rarely discussed; when it is discussed, it is done so briefly. Thus, this paper turned to three different ministries and the manifestations of the overarching policy agenda: whether it considers the North Korean refugee issue as a subcategory of North Korea and unification policy, or as a subcategory of welfare policy for minorities.

The result is mixed. On one hand, the MOU's North Korean refugee support funding, as well as its push for "one-stop service" for North Korean refugees, is increasing; North Korean refugees should be treated with eventual unification in mind, the MOU argues, with its continuing nationalistic rhetoric. On the other hand, the PCSC is showing other ministries' growing interest in the administrative designation of North Korean refugees as a part of other minority groups. Finally, MOPAS subscribes to the view that North Korean refugees are an integral part of preparing for unification, but shows little interest in nationalistic rhetoric.

Thus, it seems as though the Lee Myung-bak administration is not seeking to eliminate the contradiction in championing both multiculturalism and national solidarity based on ethnic purity by choosing one of the two platforms: the unification preparation platform or the social welfare platform. This, perhaps, is a result of the administration's priority that categorizes the North Korean refugee issue as of second tier importance, unworthy of full articulation. The Lee administration has allowed different ministries to negotiate the overarching policy with each other and through forums such as the PCSC. The Lee administration's lack of clear direction, however, has allowed each ministry's agenda to shape the discourse. The result is a mixed bag—as efforts to build consensus between the two opposite views on North Korean refugees continue, the institutional rivalry between the MOU and MOPAS is developing.

IV. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Faced with a choice between the rhetoric of multiculturalism and that of ethno-nationalism, the Lee Myung-bak presidency chose neither. Such ambiguity has allowed ministries to pursue their own agendas and interests. The PCSC, with a multicultural bent, has tried to integrate the North Korean refugee support system into that of multicultural families, and has sought consensus among

different ministries. The MOU continues its ethno-national rhetoric, guards its responsibilities, and refuses to consider the integration of the two support systems. MOPAS is mostly concerned with becoming in charge of unification management, the first step being North Korean refugee support. The Lee government needs to take action to ameliorate the situation, but how?

First, this paper recommends that the Lee administration adopt more coherent rhetoric toward North Korean refugees. The PCSC's current role is indecisive and advisory at its best; it often excludes representatives from the MOU and MOPAS. The Lee administration should also articulate a cohesive policy across different government agencies in order to maximize the benefit of limited resources and to eliminate contradicting policies and inefficiencies.

Second, there needs to be more active debate on the integration versus separation of the two issues—North Korean refugees and multiculturalism. Although combining both services would be beneficial in utilizing limited resources in the short term, the MOU's assumption that the current support for North Korean refugees as a practice run for unification is valid.

Third, in order to prevent and reduce competition between ministries for resources and control in the aftermath of unification, the Lee government should build post-unification scenarios, complete with roles for each ministry.

In the end, without a stronger drive for consensus building and steering from the Lee presidency, this trend of institutional competition may escalate further, along with the societal toll from the escalating flow of North Korean refugees. When the South Korean government cannot solve the institutional and ministerial differences surrounding fewer than 20,000 North Korean refugees, it is difficult to imagine unification. Either the rhetoric of unification or the way the North Korean refugees are dealt with needs to change if the administration wants its positions to appear based in reality.

V. APPENDIX**Table 1. Budget for North Korean Refugee-Related Projects**

Ministry	Project Description	2009 Million KRW	2010 Million KRW	% Increase
Ministry of Unification(MOU)	North Korean Refugee Settlement Administrative Support	₩6,331	₩13,245	109%
	Digital Cataloguing of North Korean Refugee and Separated Family Support	₩109	₩142	30%
	Hanawon Operation	₩1,637	₩7,582	363%
	North Korean Refugee Education, Training, and Settlement Subsidy Support	₩55,510	₩62,539	13%
MOU total		₩63,587	₩83,508	31%
Ministry of Public Administration and Security(MOPAS)	[North Korean Refugees'] Reunion with Former Northern Province Residents, Unification School's normal and professional curriculum, North Korean Refugee Progress Direction Seminar, Former Northern Province Residents Event Participation Support	₩358	₩343	-4%
MOPAS Total		₩358	₩343	-4%

Table 2. Total Budget for MOU, MOPAS, MOL, and MOHW

Ministry	General Account		Special Account		Funds		Total	
	2009	2010	2009	2010	2009	2010	2009	2010
Ministry of Unification	₩4,715	₩5,042	—	—	₩15,086	₩22,279	₩19,801	₩27,321
Ministry of Public Administration and Security	₩319,550	₩311,932	₩4,919	₩5,268	₩129,465	₩133,548	₩453,934	₩450,748
Ministry of Labor	₩11,157	₩11,422	₩670	₩786	₩193,033	₩188,558	₩204,860	₩200,766
Ministry of Health and Welfare	₩181,766	₩196,083	₩4,293	₩3,202	₩843,983	₩845,664	₩1,030,042	₩1,044,949
Unit: 100,000,000 KRW								



JOHNS HOPKINS
UNIVERSITY



U.S.-Korea Institute at SAIS
1717 Massachusetts Avenue NW, 6th Floor
Washington, DC 20036
www.uskoreainstitute.org