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Political science professor tells human rights conference in Seoul that ending North Korea abuse requires shift in focus

Posted June 26, 2013 at 10:56 am by [Tom Scherberger](#)



Thomas Smith, Ph.D., USF St. Petersburg associate professor of political science, made a presentation in South Korea last month during an international conference on human rights in North Korea.

Smith, director of the USFSP [Honors Program](#), was invited to the May 20 conference because of his scholarly work on European efforts to improve human rights in Turkey. He taught international relations from 1997 to 2000 at Koç University in Istanbul.

The Seoul conference, "[International Solidarity for North Korean Human Rights: Challenges and Opportunities](#)," included ambassadors and representatives of non-governmental organizations dealing with human rights.

Smith was the only academic invited to make a presentation, an honor that underscores his standing among human rights scholars, said Interim Regional Chancellor Bill Hogarth. "Dr. Smith's knowledge and efforts to improve an important issue in our society is to be commended," Hogarth said. "I am proud to have Dr. Smith on our faculty."

Smith said the world tends to focus on North Korea's nuclear capability and regional security rather than its horrendous human rights record. That is beginning to change, he said, and the more details about human rights abuses that emerge the more pressure will be brought to bear on the North Korean regime.

But he cautioned that what worked in Turkey may not work as well in North Korea. Turkey's abysmal human rights record has improved in the past 20 years thanks partly to the pressure European governments exerted. That pressure was effective, he said, because Turkey wants to be part of the European Union.

North Korea, one of the most totalitarian and insular nations in the world, has little interest in being a part of the global community. Still, there is hope, he said, because its current leader, Kim Jong-un, does seem to care about his image.

"We can expect even greater momentum for human rights in North Korea as more details and visuals emerge," Smith said in his presentation. Human rights abuses are widespread, including torture, murder, disappearances, and labor camps.

"Again, it goes back to the power of detail," Smith said. If the world is to be moved to do something about human rights in North Korea, the abuses must be given a face.

"Regional security is certainly critical," he said, "...but the turn toward rights focuses attention on those who suffer the most: the people of North Korea."

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