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North Korean Students Dine with Nick Clegg in Seoul

LSE IDEAS

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Hyeonsoo Lee (left) Nick Clegg UK Deputy Prime Minister (centre)

On the evening of March 27, 2012 I had a chance to have dinner with UK Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg. Mr. Clegg had traveled to South Korea for the Seoul Nuclear Security Summit, and since it was his first time in Korea, he wanted to meet some North Korean students who had made the journey to the South. This meeting was unique because it was one of the first times that a foreign politician made a point to meet North Korean refugees in South Korea and talk to them about important issues.

We dined at a traditional Korean restaurant with four other North Korean students, several delegates from the UK and one member of the British embassy in Seoul. Mr. Clegg was very gregarious; he shook everyone's hand and told us sincerely that he wanted to discuss many different topics. One interesting aspect of the conversation was that he sought to verify that there has actually been widespread starvation in North Korea. He told us that he had heard about the problem in various reports, but asked us if we could verify it personally. One North Korean student responded with a personal story about how he had gone without food for four days due to the miserable conditions at the time. He went on to inform Mr. Clegg about food shortages in North Korea, and seemed to surprise many at the table by noting that although the farmers in North Korea should have enough food, ironically, they often have the worse food security in the country because the North Korean military exercises control over the farms.

During the harvest season, various members of the North Korean military will visit the farms and inform the farmers that the crops are needed to feed the military. To add insult to injury, they even commandeer the cabbage fields, thus depriving many farmers and the people in the surrounding areas of their kimchi. A small number of farmers struggle against the military in a desperate attempt to keep a small amount of food for themselves, but this inevitably leads to violent reactions and severe beatings, sometimes resulting in death. Since North Korea still maintains the "Military First" (Songun) policy, farmers are required to fulfill a quota for the Korean People's Army. If the farmers fail to fulfill the quota, they are usually imprisoned.

Mr. Clegg also asked us about the most difficult aspects of adapting to South Korean society, so we discussed the impediments of linguistic differences, identity confusion, socioeconomic gaps and loneliness. In terms of linguistic impediments, North Korean accents can stir prejudices among some of the older South Koreans, which makes us feel outcast and alienated. Most North Koreans in the South quickly learn to hide their accents by mimicking the South Koreans. Many North Koreans in the South also experience identity confusion. I remember when I watched the 2008 Beijing Olympics, I was cheering for South Korea to win. I really wanted to shout in support of South Korea but I couldn't because I wasn't sure if it was

really my country, or if I was even accepted in the South. It was also hard for me to feel like I belonged because the moment I set foot on South Korean soil, I realized that so many people were so far ahead of me economically and socially. It was even difficult to be accepted into a university, especially at my age. Due to my status as an “illegal economic migrant” in China, I never had a chance to attend high school or receive a formal education. Nevertheless, I’ve studied hard since I moved to Seoul and was eventually accepted into Hankuk University of Foreign Studies last year.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of my journey and transition to the South was that when I was sick, or really lonely and needed someone to help me, there was nobody there: I couldn’t cry out to my mother or call my friend. That feeling of utter loneliness that was one of the lowest points in my life. Mr. Clegg and the other British delegates at the table were very kind and voiced their sympathy about the situation, and said this was the kind of information that they needed to learn most from North Koreans so that they could try to help us in the future.

During the dinner, we also had a chance to ask Mr. Clegg questions, which proved to be a great opportunity for us to learn more about the UK’s positions on North Korean issues. Initially, I asked Mr. Clegg about the UK’s role in promoting peace on the Korean peninsula. He responded that this was the reason he was here at the Seoul Nuclear Security Summit. The UK supports the South Korean government within in the context of North-South relations while simultaneously supporting North Koreans through English educational programs and other educational opportunities. I personally had the good fortune of attending a program through the British Embassy in Seoul last year called “English for the Future.” Through this program, I’ve received many opportunities that have helped me to become actively involved in efforts to learn English, and network with members of the international community.

Next, I asked about how the UK can promote human rights in North Korea. Mr. Clegg stated that, unfortunately, there’s really no way for the UK to change the human rights situation inside North Korea. The UK has tried to open numerous channels of communication with the North Korean government, but they were not receptive. The onus is on the North Korean government to make changes.

My third question touched upon the issue of domestic budget reductions in British government programs for North Korean refugees, which has lead some North Korean refugees to leave the UK for other countries like Canada and Belgium. I specifically asked Mr. Clegg if the UK should have a role in helping North Korean refugees to resettle in the UK, or if they should just resettle in South Korea. He stated that there have been more and more North Korean refugees who have initially settled in South Korea and then attempted to resettle in the UK. International law stipulates that if these North Korean refugees settle in South Korea first, they should remain South Korean citizens. Additionally, the UK has a duty and a right to help those who come from the North Korea directly, but since the UK economy has been struggling, North Korean refugees may be better off in South Korea.

Finally, as we were finishing our meal, we told Mr. Clegg about our long-term goals. One student had graduated from Korea University with a degree in law, and said that he wants to promote the rule of law in North Korea. Another student mentioned that when she was living in Pyongyang, she saw a lot of goods and materials from UNICEF, so she hopes to work for UNICEF to help people in North Korea. I personally strive to become a journalist or a politician as I attempt to convince people in South Korea about the merits of reunification. Some South Koreans are skeptical about reunification or reject it completely, but through my writing, I hope to persuade them about the need to make Korea whole again.

Before we parted ways I asked Mr. Clegg one last question: “Do you have any advice for me if I become a politician in the future?” He smiled and said, “Don’t become a politician.” At that moment, we all shared a laugh, and I left the restaurant feeling happy that such a high-level politician genuinely cares about the North Korean people. Although I sometimes feel that the prospects for my people look gloomy, I believe that our friends in the UK, and around the world, will help brighten our future.

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