

South Korea shouldn't backslide on LGBT rights

Lawmakers should strengthen protections, not weaken them.

By Ryan Thoreson

HRW (27.11.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2Rcaeje> – Conservative lawmakers in South Korea have already blocked the passage of nondiscrimination laws that would protect lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people and other minorities. Now, they're trying to defang one of the few watchdogs protecting LGBT rights in the country.

This month, opposition politician Ahn Sang-soo introduced an amendment that would remove “sexual orientation” from the mandate of the National Human Rights Commission of Korea (NHRCK), a body tasked with promoting human rights and investigating discriminatory acts in South Korea. The amendment would seriously undermine its ability to address discrimination against LGBT people in education, employment, public services, and other areas.

The NHRCK's work is badly needed. LGBT people face widespread discrimination in South Korea, with one national survey finding that nearly half of South Koreans do not want gay friends, neighbors, or colleagues. In interviews with Human Rights Watch, LGBT youth described how indifference or outright hostility toward LGBT people left them feeling isolated and alone, jeopardizing their mental health and well-

being.

Ahn's misguided opposition to LGBT rights illustrates why the NHRCK's work is so vital. Ahn justified the amendment by repeating offensive and discredited myths about LGBT people. He has also repeated the dangerous misconception that LGBT rights endanger the freedom of religion, which increasingly has been used to permit and even encourage discrimination against LGBT people around the globe.

International human rights bodies have clearly said that governments cannot subject people to discrimination because of who they are or who they love. The NHRCK has been one of the few government entities in South Korea that has taken this principle seriously and worked to protect LGBT rights.

In the weeks ahead, South Korean lawmakers should reaffirm that discrimination against LGBT people is unacceptable. Rejecting Ahn's amendment would be a start, but it isn't enough.

President Moon Jae-in, himself a former human rights lawyer, and South Korean legislators should speak up publicly supporting victims of all rights violations, including LGBT people.

They should also finally enact nondiscrimination legislation that protects the rights of minorities and show the country that LGBT rights are human rights.