

Special Review on the National Human Rights Commission of Korea
A Submission by Joint Action to
Correct National Human Rights Commission of Korea

1. Background

On October 1, 2024, 204 human rights and civil society organizations requested a special review of the National Human Rights Commission of Korea(NHRCK) to the Sub-Committee on Accreditation (SCA) of the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI). This report summarizes the problems of the NHRCK that have arisen since the request for the special review.

2. Issues arising after the October 2024 special review request

1) Repression of Human Rights Defenders (Staff and Some Commissioners)

In 2025, former Standing Commissioner Lee Choong-sang filed a criminal complaint against NHRCK staff for “forgery of official documents” during his tenure. It was an incident where the staff member misquoted an overseas case while drafting the report. Although he had repeatedly expressed his intent to press charges in the media, the NHRCK did not take any measures to protect the staff. Later, the staff union demanded the withdrawal of the complaint and measures to prevent recurrence, but there was no official organizational response to protect the staff.

Standing Commissioner Kim Yong-won also forcibly demanded In 2025, he called for the punishment of staff members who protested an agenda item concerning the “guarantee of President Yoon Suk-yeol’s right to defence,” and even expelled investigators who joined the protest from Sub-committee meetings, even when their cases were discussed. In April of the same year, he barred Directors and the Director General from entering a meeting room and demanded disciplinary action against them, simply because they had reviewed a particular agenda item in a manner inconsistent with his own views. Again, there was no organizational response to these actions to protect staff.

In this context, Chairperson Ahn Chang-ho not only failed to mediate or protect staff but openly defended the conduct of the two standing commissioners. He distorted the audit findings that concluded former Commissioner Lee violated the “duty to maintain dignity,” claiming that “there is no determination of workplace harassment.” He has never raised any objections to Commissioner Kim’s conduct in official settings and instead remained silent in the face of such behavior.

Commissioner Kim Yong-won repeatedly used abusive language during meetings, including remarks such as “brat” and “shut your mouth.” At the 7th Plenary Committee meeting on 25 March 2025, Commissioner Won Min-kyung pointed out

that Commissioner Kim's abusive remarks constituted insulting human rights violations and had a negative impact on staff, and requested the establishment of guidelines to prevent such verbal abuse. However, the Chairperson offered no response. Earlier, at the 3rd Plenary Committee meeting on 24 February, Chairperson Ahn Chang-ho initially refused to place the agenda item "Measures to Prevent Recurrence of Abusive Language" on the agenda and did so only reluctantly after other commissioners pressed for it.

Furthermore, it was later reported that, during a discussion on a public statement in the Chairperson's office on 11 December 2024, shortly after the declaration of martial law, Commissioner Kim made abusive and threatening remarks. Nevertheless, Chairperson Ahn explained that, since it was not an official meeting, he did not intervene or take protective measures, and he took no action.

2) Undermining of the NHRCK's Human Rights Protection Function and Distortion of Organizational Management

On 27 November 2024, Chairperson Ahn Chang-ho rejected, by vote, the case of "violation of the right to personal liberty due to unlawful arrest by the police," which had been deliberated in a closed session of the Plenary Committee on the afternoon of 25 November. When Commissioners Nam Kyu-seon, Won Min-kyung, Kim Yong-jik, and So Ra-mi stated, "We will write a minority opinion," and requested the drafting of the decision, Chairperson Ahn responded, "Go ahead and write a minority opinion. If I find it reasonable after reading it, I will draft the decision as the majority opinion." As protests continued, Ahn reportedly not only rebuked them in a high-handed tone but also made inappropriate remarks evaluating their appearance.

In October 2024, the Subcommittee system was changed from a three-member structure to a four-member structure, with a new rule stipulating that if votes on a petition case were tied 2-2 between acceptance and dismissal, the case would be dismissed. This effectively abolished the previous practice under which the subcommittee engaged in in-depth discussions to reach a unanimous agreement. Under Chairperson Ahn Chang-ho, this consensus-based approach was discarded. The Seoul Administrative Court later ruled that such a change in the decision-making structure was unlawful under the interpretation of the NHRCK Act and related regulations.

Since Chairperson Ahn took office, there have been increasing instances where even general agenda items were handled in closed sessions. At the first Plenary Committee meeting on 24 September 2024, he shifted the discussion of the "2023 Human Rights Report," which had previously been conducted publicly, into a closed session. Notably, at the 8th Plenary Committee meeting on 14 April 2025, he raised concerns about information leaks even among commissioners, ordered the removal of content on closed agenda items from the minutes before distribution,

and even demanded that commissioners requesting access to agenda materials sign a “pledge of non-disclosure.” This move met with strong resistance and was ultimately withdrawn.

Chairperson Ahn has engaged in improper interference by unilaterally designating petition cases concerning sexual minorities as “special (important) cases” under his direct control. In one such case involving a petition on a politician’s hate speech regarding “gender-neutral restrooms for all,” the investigator submitted a review report to the bureau director. Yet, the director—citing the Chairperson’s orders—unprecedentedly withheld the case from being placed on the agenda. Given that the petition clearly fell within the jurisdiction of the Subcommittee on Remedies for Discrimination, this constituted a blatant infringement on the authority of subcommittee commissioners.

Even after the matter became public through media reports, the NHRCK retroactively classified the petition as a “special (important) case” to justify the Chairperson’s direct management. This action directly contradicted the Special Case Manual established in 2022 . Alarming, the NHRCK is now moving to revise the manual by broadening the criteria for “special cases,” a change that would further entrench the Chairperson’s undue influence over cases of discrimination against sexual minorities.

3) Undermining of the NHRCK’s Independence Due to Political and Religious Beliefs

(1) Undermining Independence through Unrepentant and Continued Defense of an Unconstitutional Martial Law

On the night of 3 December 2024, an unconstitutional state of emergency was declared and a martial law proclamation violating human rights was announced. Yet, Chairperson Ahn, after receiving the report of martial law on the very same day, simply went back to sleep and took no action, such as issuing a statement the following day. On 9 December, when some commissioners proposed “an ex officio investigation and statement on the state of emergency” at the Plenary Committee, a majority opposed on the grounds of respecting the President’s “acts of governance,” while the Chairperson remained silent, and the meeting was held behind closed doors. Only on 11 December was a purely formal statement released, containing nothing more than general principles.

Then, abruptly, at the Plenary Committee on 10 February 2025, the NHRCK adopted the agenda item “Recommendations on Measures to Prevent Human Rights Violations Arising from the National Crisis Triggered by the Martial Law Declaration” (the so-called “Yoon Suk-yeol Right to Defense” case). Supported by six commissioners including Chairperson Ahn, this resolution asserted that “there were no cases of serious injury or death (due to the declaration of martial law), and the extent of property damage appears to have been minor,” thereby denying that human rights violations had occurred. Worse still, it echoed the President’s

narrative almost verbatim, justifying martial law as a “political and military act” in response to the alleged abuse of impeachment by the opposition. The decision even singled out the “tendencies” of certain judges to sow distrust of the judiciary, and was filled with speculative language such as “it is suspected” and “it is disputed,” leaving the decision gravely deficient in both professionalism and credibility.

In its written response to GANHRI, the NHRCK repeated the President’s arguments, even citing public distrust of the Constitutional Court to reinforce them. When the Constitutional Court ruled to remove President Yoon from office on 4 April 2025, there were internal calls for a welcoming statement, but Chairperson Ahn rejected them on the grounds that it might “appear politically biased.”

Commissioner Kim Yong-won, a Standing Commissioner of the NHRCK and concurrently the Military Human Rights Protection Officer, posted on his Facebook page statements such as: “The incumbent President is being unlawfully detained” (26 January 2025); “The Constitutional Court must be smashed” (5 February 2025); and “Impeachment constitutes a violation of the people’s right to pursue happiness” (31 March 2025). Although these posts have since been deleted, they clearly incited violence against the judiciary and denied the legitimacy of the impeachment proceedings. Such remarks not only reject the constitutional order but also constitute repeated violations of the duty of political neutrality under both the National Human Rights Commission Act and the State Public Officials Act.

Undermining the Independence of the NHRCK through Abuse of Authority Based on Religious Beliefs and Obstruction of Human Rights Protection Work

In the special review request submitted in October 2024, concerns were raised that Chairperson Ahn, during his National Assembly confirmation hearing, echoed the rhetoric of extremist Christian groups. The request warned that “with such a biased worldview and religious outlook, the work of the NHRCK could be handled in a distorted manner, deepening conflict in Korea through hatred and discrimination against minorities.” These concerns have since materialized.

Chairperson Ahn has supported individuals who incited discrimination based on extremist political or religious ideologies—for example, by endorsing riots in the courts during martial law or by rejecting sexual minorities—and has actively recommended them as expert commissioners or even as candidates for Standing Commissioner. In one notable instance, during the selection process for human rights lecturers, Ahn demanded from the staff the application documents of successful candidates, claiming that an acquaintance of his, a lawyer, had been unfairly excluded. Among those rejected at that time was Lawyer Ji Young-jun, who has consistently campaigned against the Anti-Discrimination Act and local student human rights ordinances. Ji was later put forward by the People Power

Party as a candidate for Standing Commissioner but was forced to withdraw due to strong opposition from civil society.

4) Reversal of Efforts to Protect the Socially Vulnerable and Minorities

The NHRCK also serves as a national mechanism for addressing gender discrimination. Nevertheless, Chairperson Ahn has repeatedly drawn public criticism for making sexist and sexually harassing remarks. According to a report submitted to the staff union in July 2025, he was alleged to have touched a female staff member while saying, “This shouldn’t be happening, right?” and, on another occasion, told a male investigator to “lose weight.” Furthermore, as demonstrated earlier, over the past year Chairperson Ahn has suppressed commissioners who hold different views, directly interfered in cases based on his religious convictions, and otherwise undermined the NHRCK’s independence. These actions have led to a marked regression in the Commission’s role as a gender equality mechanism and in its core human rights protection functions.

In 2024, the online course “Understanding the Anti-Discrimination Act”—the flagship subject that accounted for 34% of enrollments in the gender discrimination prevention program—was abolished, a decision widely regarded as reflecting the Chairperson’s intent. When Standing Commissioner Nam Kyu-seon demanded its reinstatement at the 8th Standing Committee meeting on 10 April 2025, Chairperson Ahn Chang-ho responded, “Then we should also include a course opposing the Anti-Discrimination Act.” The NHRCK attempted to justify the removal by claiming that the subject was excluded because it was “a matter of divided opinion.” This reasoning is unconvincing: issues addressed by the NHRCK are by their very nature socially contested and politically divisive, and the very purpose of the Commission is to represent the rights of minorities within such debates.

3. Conclusion

As noted above, the NHRCK is currently failing to clearly meet the standards required for “A status” under the Paris Principles. In the upcoming special review scheduled for October, 204 civil society organizations strongly urge the NHRCK to undertake genuine reflection and self-examination, and to commit to substantive reforms to maintain its “A status.”

4. Contact

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