

The May 18 Democratic Uprising of Gwangju (Republic of South Korea)

A Brief Introduction

Between May 18 and 27 in 1980, nearly a quarter of a million people participated to a large-scale civil mass protest in the city of Gwangju against the South Korean military government. Brutally repressed, this protest is recorded as the bloodiest instance of government repression in contemporary Korean history. Army began indiscriminately attacking the city, killing and injuring almost 2000 people according to civil society groups and historical researches. The May 18 Democratic Movement played a pivotal role in the democratization process of South Korea, even if for many years, Gwangju's "May 18th Democratic Uprising" was a discarded moment in Korean History. Over the years, the May 18th's historical significance has expanded and its values have become further understood and recognized nationally and internationally.

Gwangju as a Human Rights City

Gwangju is a city where citizens has fought fiercely for decades defending democracy and against injustice when faced with a variety of crises : Donghak Peasant Revolution, the Gwangju Students Independent Movement, the May 18th Democratic Movement, and the June Democracy Movement. Different civil society groups and former victims of the May 18 events sought to inherit and develop the "spirit of Gwangju" with the strong support of the City Hall.

Indeed, the City has been the first in the country to enact a Human Rights Promotion Ordinance (2009), amended to the Ordinance on Guarantee and Promotion of Human Rights (2012). It established a basic plan for promoting human rights, developed and implemented human rights indicators, established a human rights training system, promoted a human rights activities group support, expanded Gwangju's human rights charter practices as well as opened a Citizen's Committee for promoting human rights. The City of Gwangju was also the first one to established a human rights agency in the country, a self governing body for human rights violations and relief. They also supported the creation of a local team of seven ombudsman in order to protect and promote human rights of citizens.

Also, in an attempt to globalize the May 18 spirit, the City of Gwangju started strengthening international cooperation, advocating that democracy, human rights and peace policies, with a view to contribute to world peace and to improvements in the state of human rights overall.

Advancing local and regional governments' global commitment for human rights: the World Human Rights Cities Forum

The World Human Rights Cities Forum is an international forum held annually since 2011 in the City of Gwangju with a view to advance the "Human Rights City" vision and promote the movement of local governments for human rights across the world. Each year, the WHRCF gathers hundreds of local authorities, civil society, academia and other stakeholders engaged in local human rights action. It

provides a platform to exchange practices, foster city-to-city learning and develop political debates and new alliances at the international level.

Co-organized by the City of Gwangju, the UCLG Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights and the Raoul Wallenberg Institute, the Forum has become a significant platform for participants to showcase their initiatives and introduce their endeavors to the international community, an opportunity to learn about different visions and strategies of human rights cities.

The Forum seek to address consolidate human rights issues – as women rights, non-discrimination, migration, diversity, peace culture or participatory democracy – as well as emerging ones, like the right to housing, the right to the city, digital rights or climate emergency in link with the SDGs. This year is a special occasion as it commemorates the 40th anniversary of Gwangju Uprising, focusing more specifically on historical memory and human rights at the local level.