

FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY

Timothy Cho: a North Korean's warning to the UK

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During the May 2026 local elections in Britain, one candidate stood out from the rest: **Timothy Cho**, the Conservative candidate for Heaton North, an electoral ward in the Greater Manchester area, and a North Korean defector. At the count, the Labour Party candidates were declared elected. However Cho brought something new and unique to the campaign trail: He expressed a deep sense of gratitude for Britain's history and

institutions stemming from his experience of persecution and conversion to Christianity while imprisoned in China. While his fellow candidates promoted themselves on their knowledge of political and economic governance, Cho, who had grown up in one of the world's most oppressive dictatorships spoke from experience about the need to protect freedom and value democracy or risk their demise.

In reality, fundamental democratic rights have been eroding in the UK for years. Ongoing court cases involving Christians accused of silently praying, uncontrolled racial and religiously motivated violence, multiple accusations of two-tier policing involving grooming gangs, sexual assault reports against girls and women perpetrated by refugees, and arrests for hate speech, demonstrate that Cho's warning is already a reality for many Britons. While the results of the May 7 elections were a clear rejection of the traditional British party system, hardline Muslims and environmental fanatics also received votes. Cho's miraculous journey from North Korea to Heatons North serves as a stark reminder that political oppression is the absence of democratic freedom and that the transition from one to the other is possible. This is his story.

Timothy Cho was born in Onsong County, in the far north of North Korea, near the border with China, into what he calls a "decent good family". Aged nine, he returned home from school one day to find that his parents, both high school teachers, had fled the country.

Cho immediately became the "son of betrayers". In North Korea families are punished collectively if one member escapes. This principle is called "guilt by association" or Yeo-jaw-mea in Korean. His house was reallocated to "patriots" and he was expelled from school. For a period he lived on the streets with other "enemies of the state" barely surviving. Later he made his way to his grandmother. But when he became a teenager, he was told he would likely be sent to forced labour rather having a normal future or military career because of his parent's betrayal.

In 2004, Cho planned his first escape. There are three routes out of North Korea: across the two million landmines to South Korea, across the mountain region into Russia, or into China. Cho along with 18 others took his chances with China. Cho describes what happened: "We were all arrested by China's military at the Mongolian border. When North Koreans escape to China, they are often arrested very easily and they also have a price tag on their head. Chinese people can be paid for reporting known North Korean escapees".

The group were moved from prison to prison before they were eventually deported

back to North Korea and imprisoned - where Mr Cho saw things he “will never forget”. He witnessed children being stabbed to death, a man being tortured, and was forced to watch a public execution - with the children made to sit in the front row. After being tortured himself and the only survivor of the group he had tried to escape with, Mr Cho said he was barely able to walk as he made the journey back to his grandparents' house.

On his second attempt in 2006, through a friend of his grandmother, he managed to escape across the border to China with nine others. They climbed over the fence of an American school in Shanghai, hoping someone would protect them, but they were again arrested by the Chinese police and sent to an international prison. Here Cho fell into a deep depression. He cried every day convinced he would be returned to North Korea and executed.

Cho describes what happened. “I was crying every night in Shanghai international prison. There was a South Korean in my cell, a really scary guy who was a mafia gangster. He was the only one I could speak to because North and South Koreans speak the same language. He read the Bible every night and seeing me cry, he brought it to me. You could read this and pray to God for your survival, he said. I looked at him and thought, I had nothing to lose”.

Cho didn't know how to pray so he asked the gangster what to do. “You say amen at the end of your wishes”, he told him. So Cho prayed: “God, I don't want to be killed. Amen”. That was Cho's first prayer. Later he prayed: “If your reality exists in this world, you be my freedom and I'll devote the rest of my life to you”. Unexpectedly, after two months of desperate prayer, international media helped secure his release after a student at the school took a photo of the group being arrested and alerted journalists to his case.

With help from Christian networks and people assisting defectors he travelled through parts of Asia seeking asylum before eventually reaching safety in Britain in 2008. He was 17 years old. Cho described his arrival in Britain as the moment he experienced both physical freedom and personal dignity for the first time.

Looking back on his life Cho said: “I still suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. The images of screaming and anguish continue to haunt me. North Korea has the most creative torture systems in the world. So many acts of inhumanity would happen before my eyes, but I am grateful to God that I somehow managed to get free.”

Since arriving in the UK he has received a BA in International Relations and Politics from the University of Salford and an MA in International Relations and Security from the University of Liverpool. He joined Fiona Bruce MP as an aide from 2018-19, and currently works as an Inquiry Clerk at the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group on North Korea. He stood for election in the English local elections of May 2021 and 2026.

Cho spoke publicly about what freedom means for him at the 2022 Geneva Summit for Human Rights and Democracy, he said: “what I remember of my experience of living in this totalitarian regime was that I didn’t know who I was, what choice I had, what I loved, and what my dream was. The past years of my life in democracy have helped me to discover who I am, what I love and care about, and what I stand for – our intrinsic democratic constitutional values of freedom of faith, expression, speech, and opportunity.”