

South Korean gay couple sees court win as breakthrough for equality

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Landmark Seoul court ruling on national health coverage for gay couples, the tide may finally be turning in their years-long struggle for equal recognition in South Korea for LGBT partnerships

SEOUL, Feb 27 (Reuters) - For So Sung-uk and Kim Yong-min, who last week won a landmark Seoul court ruling on national health coverage for gay couples, the tide may finally be turning in their years-long struggle for equal recognition in South Korea for LGBT partnerships.

The 32-year-old activists, together since they first met during their national service a decade ago, have regularly posted about their relationship on social media and in public forums, including a wedding ceremony in 2019 that drew some 300 attendees.

"The more visible we are and the more we talk about our story, I think the more we can change people's opinions and help other LGBTQ people like us gather up courage," Kim said in an interview in the three-room Seoul apartment he shares with So.

"I believe if more LGBTQ people show who they are, change will come faster."

The two also managed to secure national health insurance coverage for So, who works with a youth HIV support group, as a dependent based on his partnership with Kim, an employee for an organisation that advocates for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer rights.

But when local media drew attention to the pair's story and the National Health Insurance Service's official acknowledgement that they were a couple, the authorities backtracked and revoked So's coverage, saying the approval had been an administrative error.

Thus began a two-year legal struggle as So sued the health service, initially losing in a local administrative court but prevailing when the Seoul High Court last week [reversed](#) course and affirmed his right to coverage.

"I see this ruling not just as a one-off win but a sign that we are starting to win - that love has won and it will again," So said.

"Because we are not recognised as family by law in South Korea, things like guardianship or issuing real estate registration certificates on each other's behalf are out of our reach."

Kim added that the reversal was a relief for the country's LGBTQ community.

"People have been feeling tired of not seeing much progress for a long time," he said.

In South Korea, where LGBT anti-discrimination laws face strong resistance from conservative religious groups and others, the decision was hailed by human rights group Amnesty International as a "step towards marriage equality".

Taiwan is alone among Asian governments in recognising same-sex marriages, which it legalised in 2019, although [Thailand's legislature](#) is moving forward with bills that could lead to approval while court cases have pressed for LGBT couples' rights [in India](#) and [Japan](#).

South Korea's health service said in a statement it would conduct a legal review to decide whether to challenge the latest court decision before the Supreme Court.

Kim and So blamed inaction by politicians for South Korea's slow progress on LGBTQ rights, while acceptance is rising among the general public.

"Despite the hatred you see online and the discrimination, many LGBTQ people are still living well and happily in this country and there are many people who support us," So said.

A survey by South Korean pollster Realmeter last year found that nearly seven in 10 respondents said an anti-discrimination law was necessary.

Anti-discrimination bills have been proposed but lawmakers have failed to move forward with them.

"Politicians like to hide behind social consensus," So said.

"But it is their job to make society a more equal and better place to live, not just sit back and wait for society to change."

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