



NORTH KOREA: THE NADIR OF FREEDOM

By Kongdan Oh

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North Korea is a country devastated by tyrannical rule, famine, death, and a strict caste system. A small country, it is nonetheless important because it's located in the middle of the dynamic Northeast Asia region, surrounded by China, Russia, South Korea, and Japan. Also, its weapons capabilities are among the world's most deadly. It tested a nuclear weapon on October 8, 2006, and is unlikely to cease its pursuit of these weapons.

Unlike East Germany, North Korea has had no mass exodus. By early 2007, 10,000 North Koreans had defected to South Korea. The U.S. has few North Koreans; those that are here are generally attached to the UN mission.

North Korea's society is dynastic and totalitarian. The quality of life in other totalitarian countries is excellent compared to life in North Korea. In Cuba, for instance, ordinary people's concerns might include the price of corn that day; in North Korea, it's a question of how to procure a boiled potato or two.

Kim Jong-il isn't the president--his father, Kim Il-sung (1912-94), was the first and last president under the constitution. Jong-il rules the country as Chairman of the National Defense Commission, the top government body, which consists of nine military and civilian officials. He is also General Secretary of the Korean Workers' Party and Supreme Commander of the Korean People's Army, and so the ultimate decision-maker on everything. The Party is Kim's executive organ, the government carries out his

orders, and the military protects him.

Based on a quarter-century of observation, including Chinese, Japanese, and Korean resources, interviews with defectors, and meetings with North Korean officials traveling abroad, any vestiges of North Korea's Marxist-socialist system are long gone. It is now a hybrid form of a dictatorial, pseudo-dynastic society. The socialist system is still the main super-structure of the government, but a strict class system divides the society into 51 classes of human beings--although now that the country is so poor that it lacks computers, electricity is spotty, and even paper is scarce, the system has been simplified to three classes: the core, who are assumed to be loyal to Kim (formerly 25 percent, now less than 20 percent); the ordinary, or wavering, who give the regime no particular reason not to trust them (formerly 50 percent, now down to 40 percent); and the hostile, who are of suspicious family or personal history. The percentage of "hostile" citizens has increased from 25 percent to 40 percent, in a telling shift.

Even if someone hasn't seen the records, he knows his class. He can sense it. If your father was reactionary, you're in the hostile class, even though you are innocent of any transgression. You were marked at birth. The core political class gets the best in food, housing, education, jobs, and medical care. Most reside in the Pyongyang region.

The ordinary class must depend on luck, personal effort, and bribery in their struggle for a decent life. Sometimes they get a little better ration; for instance, on February 16, the chairman's birthday. On that day, which is something like Christmas and New Year's rolled together, they might get a bag of candy, a boiled egg, a pound of pork, wine, or cigarettes. The regime knows that it's dangerous to let people become too discontented.

The hostile class is pushed out to the countryside and towns, where they must fend for themselves. They struggle to survive, and in hard times many of them die (1-2 million in the famine of 1994-5, out of a population of only 21 million). During the famine, those in Pyongyang might see only the occasional beggar who'd come to seek money, but in border areas, whole villages could perish.

Class assignment is largely hereditary. It is recorded

secretly in police documents; people infer from their life chances--for instance, being consistently passed over for promotion--what class they are in. It is unusual to move up from the hostile class, but it is frequent for those who get into political trouble to be suddenly demoted from the upper two classes to the hostile class. For example, when the Party secretary Hwang Jang-yop-- the founder of the North Korean national philosophy of *juche*, or self-reliance, and chancellor of Kim Il-Sung University--defected to South Korea in 1997, his wife was driven to suicide, his immediate family, friends, relatives, and colleagues were all demoted, imprisoned, or killed. The number of his associates killed may have run into the thousands. Even the man who was employed to carry his cane and open doors for him (Hwang had a bad back) was purged. All male descendants usually suffer the same fate as a punished person: if a father is sent to a prison camp, all his sons will be sent as well (married daughters may be spared).

The state and party control all media. If you can get a radio, the dial must be fixed to the government's Korean Central Broadcasting Station. Televisions receive only the government station, Korean Central Television. Remote controls are hidden. Houses are wired to receive announcements from the local party officials. You don't have the freedom to not listen: you must attend weekly meetings prepared to answer questions on that week's broadcasts. Listening to foreign broadcasts such as *Voice of America* or *Radio Free Asia* is punishable by imprisonment, although first-time offenders usually are just written up. (After a second time, you're watched; the third time can mean prison.) However, people do listen to foreign stations anyway; it is becoming easier to bribe the police, who often listen to foreign stations as well.

The state controls all institutions. The Ministry of People's Security (police) serves as watchers/controllers. The State Security Department, which is under the direct control of Kim's National Defense Commission, investigates crimes against the regime (i.e., coups). Its officers employ civilian informants to spy on their neighbors. The Security Command, the military counter-intelligence organization, investigates both military and civilian crimes against the state. Kim is also assumed to be head of the Party's Organization and Guidance Department, which controls important appointments and firings in all organizations.

In short, everybody watches everybody, and nobody knows whom to trust, even among friends, or who reports to whom. Even the security organizations watch each other.

The Kim regime has perfected the ancient Chinese system of "household watch" or the "five-family system." In every apartment building, neighborhood, and town, households are grouped together. A local party official appoints a resident (usually an older retired woman) to watch over her neighbors and report any suspicious behavior (missing work, entertaining strangers, going out at unusual times, etc.). North Korean officials who travel overseas are always accompanied by at least one State Security or party official to watch over them; their immediate family members are kept in North Korea as hostages.

North Koreans' everyday expressions demonstrate how

thoroughly they have internalized awareness of surveillance: "Daytime stories will be picked up by birds, nighttime stories by mice. . . . Even the clay wall has ears. . . . Don't trust your own back. . . . Don't let your in-laws know your inner thoughts. . . . When a wife no longer loves you, she may betray you. . . . Teach your kids to keep their mouths shut."

North Korea ranks zero or near zero on all the usual freedom indices: freedom of public speech, private speech, public religious worship (the few churches are facades put up by the regime; the congregations consist of party spies and a few elderly people), assembly and association (other than weddings, funerals, and small holiday gatherings), the press, residency, domestic and foreign travel, political participation (there is only one candidate on the ballot, chosen by the party), and due process of law (citizens are subject to executions or imprisonment after summary judgment; the legal counsel works for the state).

The regime assigns one's house and city, the place where a job is provided and ration coupons are issued. Living or traveling elsewhere requires special permits that are checked by the police. Men are usually assigned to live where their parents live; women may move for marriage. The government sometimes relocates individuals or families--e.g., banishment of handicapped people or those who have committed political offenses from Pyongyang to the remote mountains, or relocation away from major highways, railways, or foreign investment zones. One needs money to bribe officials to travel even for a family funeral (without paying the bribe, one would need some seven documents to travel).

As an example of how the legal system works, one high-ranking core-class woman who directed a military procurement office was purged for failure to give a generous allotment of fabric to her supervisor for his own suits. He accused her of swindling, and she was tortured when she wouldn't confess to the charges. After a show trial, she was sentenced to nine years in prison.

North Korea's economy is basically supported by foreign aid and drug and weapon trafficking. North Koreans survive on barter, walking dozens of miles to trade what they can for potatoes, for instance. Men are drafted for 10 or more years of military service, which begins at age 17 and can last til age 30, with only one or two home leaves and no marriage or girlfriends over these years. Wealthy families can pay bribes to keep their sons out of the military. After military service, men are assigned jobs, often sent in groups to construction sites. Since 1997, the state's motto has been "The military is the foundation of our society." One cannot change jobs without paying a bribe. Women are also assigned jobs, although some get permission to stay home to rear their children.

That there has been no revolution is attributable to the Confucian culture, based on strong family ties. No one wants to get his family in trouble, for males up to the eighth cousin level will be punished for anything you do. Most people have little information about other towns or other countries and no basis to compare their lives to others'. People cannot gather to plan a revolution, and in any event they tend to believe the party propaganda,

which holds that Americans and Japanese are killers and rapists; South Koreans (at least the officials) are the dogs of American imperialists; and the outside world is hostile to North Koreans. Borders are blocked, although it is possible to get into China for business by paying bribes. The border with China is the only porous one, but under a secret agreement entered into in 2003, China is committed to return defectors, and its police pay citizens to report defectors. The South Korean government does not welcome defectors, feeling burdened with just the few thousand there already.

North Korean society is rotting from the inside, but the

regime could still last a long time, and meanwhile its people are suffering horribly. Only perhaps some 2 million members of the top cadre support the regime; how to spur them to take action is a challenge. With North Korea boxed in by the Chinese and South Koreans, we can't do much to physically reach its people. We can, however, better use international radio and other media for public diplomacy, countering the propaganda by conveying that Americans are personally charitable and would welcome them. We also need to encourage the South Korean government to improve its treatment of defectors and facilitate defectors' communicating with those they left behind.

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