

Prospects for a People's Revolution in North Korea: Is Pyongyang Going to be the Next Tripoli?

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No totalitarian regime in history has survived longer than North Korea's. According to an expert, "North Korea is the world's longest lasting species of totalitarianism—6 decades so far and counting. Furthermore, it is the only totalitarian regime to survive a leadership transition—the hereditary succession in July 1994 of Kim Jong-il to follow his father Kim Il-sung as dictator."¹ Established in 1948 by the young and charismatic leader Kim Il-sung, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has distinguished itself with a unique combination of personality cult, *juche* ideology, a command economy, and military-first policy. The regime survived a war with the United States in the early 1950s, witnessed the fall of the Soviet Empire and Saddam Hussein, suffered the worst famine in an industrial society in the mid-1990s, and continues to develop nuclear weapons. Now Pyongyang's totalitarian regime is trying to achieve a second hereditary succession from the ailing Kim Jong-il to his youngest son, Kim Jung-un, in his twenties. Many experts still remember the embarrassment of predicting the collapse of the North Korean regime in the aftermath of collapsing communist regimes in Eastern Europe. Yet the specter of an unexpected wave of people's will to rise up against decades-old authoritarian/totalitarian regimes in the Middle East raises questions about the future of the North Korean regime once again. At the age of sixty-nine, Kim Jong-il and his regime look vulnerable. Amid isolation and worsening economic conditions, Kim's health is weakening since he suffered a

stroke in the summer of 2008. The sudden emergence of the young Kim Jung-un in the fall of 2010 suggests that the regime is preparing for a second hereditary succession. Many speculate that the succession will be more difficult this time, all things considered. Some experts believe the second succession could lead to a final end of the North Korean regime, if not the state. Leaked U.S. diplomatic cables show that the U.S. government, along with China and South Korea, is increasingly concerned about the possible collapse of the North Korean government. According to cables released by WikiLeaks and reported on by several media outlets, top U.S. diplomats have discussed a collapse in the past year with their counterparts from South Korea. The future of the North Korean regime will have important implications for regional and global security as well as inter-Korean relations. Given the widespread pessimism regarding the likelihood of the current Kim Jong-il regime voluntarily giving up its nuclear weapons, regime change would be the only viable option

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for complete and irreversible denuclearization. Some U.S. experts have suggested that the policy of actively supporting regime change should be held in reserve as a possible course of U.S. action.² Whether a regime change or a regime collapse, any change in North Korea will most likely start from a turn of events within Pyongyang's totalitarian regime. Whether it will be initiated by the North Korean people remains unclear.

Weakening Regime in Pyongyang

There are several characteristics of a totalitarian regime: an absolute dictator and ruling party; a totalist/utopian ideology; all-pervasive terror; a monopoly of coercive apparatus; a centrally planned economy; and a monopoly over mass communications.³ The Kim Jong-il regime in Pyongyang shares many of these characteristics. North Korea has been ruled by the Kim family under the *juche* ideology with military and other state apparatus terrorizing the whole population through central control of their economic and social activities. In doing so, the Kim regime has relied on several tools: restrictive social policies; manipulation of ideas and information; use of force; co-optation; manipulation of foreign governments; and institutional coup-proofing.⁴ Yet Pyongyang is best described as a failing or eroding totalitarian regime, where exhaustion, loosening of central control, and weakening over the monopoly on information are taking their toll.⁵

There have been signs that the regime's control over the population is weakening. First, the regime does not have full control of the economic life of the people under communist planning. With the continuing chronic food shortages, the economic situation seems to be getting worse. The North Korean authorities do not provide a nation-wide food supply anymore except in the capital city of Pyongyang. This circumstance means twenty million North Koreans have had to find their own way to survive. This spring, even the four million Pyongyang residents were told not to ex-

pect a supply of rice until the fall harvest. Indeed, the price of rice has increased drastically to 2,100 KRW per kilogram, a hundredfold increase from the failed currency reform in November 2009.⁶ Second, unable to provide basic food and goods to its population, the state allowed markets in major cities with partial economic reform in July 2002. Since then both legal and black markets have spread rapidly in Pyongyang and other places. The failed currency reform in November 2009 accelerated privatization of economic life among the North Korean people. The spread of markets is creating a new emerging class of rich people who are engaged in both legal trade and smuggling, using their party and military connections. This in turn is producing a new source of social tension as people openly complain about rampant corruption and illegal activities among government officials and elites. Third, the Kim regime is also losing control of its people's movement. Its security over the border with China has become so porous, with poor management and corruption among border patrols, that up to 300,000 North Koreans have crossed the Yalu and Tuman rivers to China looking for food since the famine of the 1990s. Among those defectors, more than 20,000 made it to Seoul. Fourth, the regime's effort to control information is also loosening. Thriving markets provide people with the opportunity to exchange information as well as goods. Various sources report that increasing numbers of North Koreans are enjoying drama, movies, and popular songs from South Korea and other countries. They smuggle these prohibited items through China and circulate them in markets using DVD, CD, USB, and mobile phones.⁷ Smuggled radio is an important source of information about the outside world. Listening to Voice of America (VOA), Free Asia Radio (FRA), and other South Korean channels, North Koreans receive news of the people's revolutions in the Middle East and spread the word to fellow citizens through the markets. And even though mobile phones are still very limited, North Korea is also obtaining them. Since the Egyptian Orascom Telecom



introduced the first cell phone service in North Korea in 2008, the number of cell phone subscribers rapidly grew to 660,000 as of 2011.⁸ This does not include Chinese cell phones that are widely used along the North Korean border with China. Using smuggled Chinese telephones, many defectors in Seoul and China communicate with their families and relatives inside North Korea who are receiving outside information as well as money transfers.

People's Revolution, Not Likely Yet

Despite the deteriorating health of Kim Jong-il, uncertainty over Kim Jung-un's succession, and weakening power of the regime to control its increasingly discontented population, the people's revolution seen in the streets of Middle Eastern cities is hard to imagine in North Korea in the near future. North Korean society is under very different conditions from its Middle Eastern counterparts. First, there is no political force to unite and drive the average North Korean person to rise up against the regime. Despite the population's increasing discontent and criticism of the Kim Jong-il regime, most North Koreans seem to remain loyal to the regime out of fear, helplessness, ignorance, brain washing, and having no alternative. North Korean society has no memory of regime change under a different leadership. There is no opposition party or any political dissidents comparable to those that existed prior to the Jasmine Revolution in Middle Eastern countries. Even in Libya, where Gaddafi and his family exercised brutal suppression very similar to that of Kim Jong-il, exercising state terror through the military and police, tribal leadership provided a political force to unite different rebel groups and people against the regime. In Egypt, there were cases of regime change from Nasser and Sadat before Mubarak. In Libya, Gaddafi himself took power through a coup. Meanwhile, North Korea's founder Kim Il-sung established a system where he, accompanied by his family,

became a deity in total isolation and indoctrination of the entire population. In the name of *juche* ideology, the Kim family has become the sole guardian of the regime so that father and son succession is regarded as a *fait accompli*. After three years in Pyongyang as the British ambassador, Peter Huges recently told the press that he did not sense active support for family succession by the North Korean public. Yet he did not see the possibility of mass protest in North Korea, either. "North Korea does not have an established civil society. It is difficult to expect a joint activity or protest at the [popular] level due to strong control and suppression by the state," said ambassador Huges.⁹

Second, North Korean society lacks the tools to mobilize its people against its brutal regime. While the popular revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt were largely powered by SNS, mobile phone, and the Internet, North Korean people have no free flow of information and access to free communication. Their access to outside information is very limited. North Korean people cannot communicate freely among themselves. If SNS played a critical role in civil revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, most North Koreans do not have access to computers or cell phones; the recent surge of 600,000 cell-phone users only represents a very privileged 2.5 percent of its twenty-four million general population. In the cases of Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt, the number was 171, 106 and 87 percent.¹⁰ A US\$900 cell phone is out of reach for most North Koreans, who make less than one dollar per day. Even if one is wealthy enough to afford one, cell phone registration must go through strict reviews by the authorities. Meanwhile, North Korean television and radio have fixed channels set to its propaganda machine. Those who dare to enjoy popular movies, drama, or songs from the outside world risk imprisonment and torture with accusations of national treason.

Third, the country is in complete isolation from the outside world. While every year 8 million tourists visit Tunisia, only roughly 1,500 Western tourists visit Pyongyang each year, making North Korea one of the



most secluded places on earth. According to the U.S. State Department travel guidelines, “North Korea limits trade and transportation links with other countries and tightly restricts the circumstances under which foreigners may enter the country and interact with local citizens. Telephone, facsimile, and Internet access are unavailable in many areas of the country, and foreigners can expect their communications to be monitored by North Korean officials . . . Foreign visitors to North Korea may be arrested, detained, or expelled for activities that would not be considered criminal outside the DPRK, including involvement in unsanctioned religious and political activities, engaging in unauthorized travel, or interaction with the local population.”¹¹ Average North Koreans do not have much chance to see or have contact with the outside world, making them easy targets of state propaganda. The seclusion provides the Pyongyang regime with a useful environment to blame outside pressure and imperialist plots for the economic difficulties and sufferings of the North Korean people.

Fourth, Kim is in full control of his military and secret police. Under the banner of his military-first policy, Kim established a complete monopoly over his military command. Indeed, Kim’s official title is Chairman of the National Defense Commission, which is regarded as the country’s most powerful political institution, even over the communist party. In Egypt and Tunisia, the refusal of the military to follow orders from the regime to suppress the people’s revolt was critical in the final end of the regime. On the other hand, Kim Jong-il has co-opted the military by bestowing on it policy influence, prestige, and economic incentives.¹² The military elites have a vast interest in keeping the regime in power. Any sign of opposition or plot against the regime has been brutally suppressed through mutual surveillance, imprisonment, torture, and public execution. According to Amnesty International, North Korea runs huge political prison camps in which up to 200,000 North Koreans are interned, suffering from malnutrition, disease, beatings, and

subject to execution. The scale and size of the camps have been increased since 2001.¹³ The regime’s brutal control creates genuine fear among its population. Should the people rise against the regime, Kim Jong-il’s military and security guards will be ready to crush them with brutal force. After all, it was unwavering loyalty of Chinese military to the communist regime that played a critical role in the final days of Tiananmen Square against the freedom movement of the Chinese people a few decades ago.

Fifth, despite its international isolation, Kim Jong-il and his regime enjoy strong support from a longtime ally and a rising hegemonic power, China. Once the people took to the streets demanding freedom and democracy against the troubled tyrannies of Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, they received warm support from the international community. The United States, despite its longtime partnership with those dictators in their fight against terrorism, demanded that the regimes step down. In Libya, Gaddafi’s military repression of rebel forces invited major military intervention by the coalition forces of NATO led by France, the UK and the United States. Unfortunately, the international dynamics of the North Korean case will be very different. It is widely known that the Chinese leadership has an unchanging strategic interest in keeping the North Korean regime in opposition to the U.S.-ROK alliance.¹⁴ China places top priority on maintaining the regime over other issues such as denuclearization and human rights in North Korea. The Chinese government reportedly has set up a contingency plan to intervene in case of major instability in North Korea.¹⁵ Premier Hu Jin-tao promised “the DPRK-China friendship will steadily grow strong generation after generation as it . . . [withstands] all sorts of tests and trials of history” during his meeting with Kim Jong-il last year.¹⁶ There are increasing contacts and exchanges among high-ranking officials between the two communist allies. Kim Jong-il has paid eight visits to China since 2000, four of which were made between May 2010 and August 2011.



The people's revolution in the Middle East has awakened anxiety in Pyongyang. North Korea strongly criticized American military bombing of Gaddafi forces as a typical imperialist interventionist policy.¹⁷ Calling the events in the Middle East the "Color Revolution," North Korea issued a warning that "a Color revolution is a similar case where former Eastern European countries collapsed after they suffered [from a] propaganda war and ideology-cultural intrusion by the imperialists."¹⁸ The Foreign Ministry spokesperson criticized the U.S. bombing of Gaddafi's forces as a "brutal violation of [the] independence of [a] sovereign state and territorial integrity."¹⁹ North Korean authorities are reportedly strengthening their control over their population. On the one hand, they relaxed the penalties against crimes related to daily economic activities. At the same time, they mobilized new surveillance by communist forces, security police, and the military; strengthened border controls with China; restricted mobile phone use; and sent guidelines for local authorities to watch for any sign of social disruption. As the protests in the Middle East intensified in the spring, North Koreans were told not to have a meal among more than two people nor to have long conversations on the street.²⁰ In February of this year, China's police chief, Meng Jianzhu, visited Pyongyang to discuss collaboration and information sharing with his counterpart for blocking the wave of a democracy movement from the Middle East.²¹

Will Kim Jung-un Repeat His Father's Success?

The Kim Jong-il regime shows signs of weakened central controls and eroding power. Yet its totalitarian nature is largely in place as the military provides Kim Jong-il with the necessary instruments of terror to intimidate its populations. It is premature to expect a regime collapse in North Korea of the sort where a complete evaporation of political power would trigger a reorganization of state power leading to the establishment

of a new regime type. Moreover, one needs to distinguish a regime collapse from a state collapse in which a state cannot control its borders and loses authority over large chunks of territory, plagued by chronic internal warfare, violence, lawlessness, and economic collapse.²² Even if the Kim Jong-il regime collapses, it would not necessarily lead to a collapse of the North Korean state. An expert noted that "there are certainly good reasons to be skeptical about the possibility of fundamental political change in North Korea, certainly through a 'people-power' type social movement that has toppled dictatorships elsewhere. The country's cult-like political system, its relative geographical and political isolation, the absence of any real civil society, and repressive state control all clearly reduce the impetus and opportunities for change from below."²³

However, the lack of the North Korean people's political will does not mean that Pyongyang's totalitarian regime is secure. The expected second hereditary succession from Kim Jong-il to Kim Jung-un will present the most serious challenge to Pyongyang since the first successful one in 1994. When Kim Jong-il was officially debuted on North Korea's political scene in 1974, North Korea had strong support from its allies in Moscow and Beijing. South Korea was still poor. And Kim Jong-il had two decades to establish himself as the next leader before he assumed his current leadership position after his father's sudden death in 1994. To the contrary, the situation in which the current succession is taking place is not so friendly to the North Korean leadership. No one inside or out of North Korea had seen Kim Jung-un's face before he was first introduced to the North Korean people when he was named as the vice chairman of the Central Military Committee in September 2010. At the age of 28, he was awarded a four-star generalship. Yet the situation he faces is much more daunting. North Korea is very much isolated with numerous international sanctions. The South Korean economy is 25 times bigger and average South Koreans are 15 times wealthier than North Korea.²⁴ What is worse, Kim Jung-un may not have much time to consolidate his



own political base. Many expect that Kim Jong-il's weakening health will not sustain him much longer and that time is running out. North Korea has declared that it will achieve the mission of building a "strong and prosperous great country (*kang-sung dae-guk*)" by 2012, the centennial anniversary of its founding father, Kim Il-Sung's, birth. April 15, the birthday of Kim Il-Sung next year will be an important moment for North Korea's political calendar, because some expect that the North Korean regime will declare Kim Jong-un to be the official heir of Chairman Kim Jong-il.

The problem is that succession in totalitarian regime involves a lot of anxiety, tensions, and uncertainties for the elites. It often evolves into power struggles between the old guard and the new blood as a new leader tries to consolidate a power base. There is already a sign of an emerging power struggle in Pyongyang. A longtime North Korea observer, Dr. Suh Dae-sook, has expressed strong doubts about the second succession attempt by the Kim family. Recent reshuffling of the most prestigious National Defense Commission, where old generations of generals were replaced with younger generals, indicates that the regime is facing "very serious trouble" with some people at the top opposing the succession. And "the tension will increase," said Suh.²⁵ His observation is shared by other experts in Seoul. Dr. Nam Sung-wook, the Director of the Institute for National Security Strategy (INSS), a think tank funded by the National Intelligence Service (NIS), said that there is strong opposition to Kim Jong-un's succession behind the political scenes of the North Korean regime. Such tensions were thought to have prompted North Korea's military provocations in 2010 toward South Korea. Dr. Nam said that the North Korean attack on the ROK navy ship the *Cheonan* in March and on Yonpyong Island in November last year could be explained as Kim Jong-il's efforts to consolidate domestic support against emerging criticism of his succession plan.²⁶ What is important is that Kim Jong-il needs time and energy to prepare a smooth power transition of power to his younger son. It may

happen. But if Kim Jong-il passes away suddenly, say, within five years, the North Korean regime could experience serious political turmoil with intensifying power struggle among elites. Such uncertainty may eventually bring about a power vacuum in Pyongyang with possible regime collapse. Still, in the immediate or medium term, the most possible case would be a change within the regime through elite politics rather than a change of regime by the people.²⁷

Conclusion

The sudden rise of Kim Jong-un in 2010 signals that Pyongyang's totalitarian regime is entering an uncharted territory of leadership change. It is during a period of leadership change that totalitarian regimes are most vulnerable to collapse. Yet Pyongyang's totalitarian regime has proved to be resilient enough to surmount the first challenge in 1994 with hereditary succession that has lasted almost two decades. Whether the Kim family will pull off such a miracle again with a second hereditary succession remains to be seen. All things considered, the second transition will involve many more challenges and much more risk for the regime. No matter how hard Kim Jong-il tries to make the transition smooth, he does not seem to have much time to set up all the mechanisms for his young and inexperienced son. Both domestic conditions and the international environment for North Korea today are much worse than ever. The regime's power to control its country is weakening in every aspect. And the international pressure to sanction its nuclear defiance has been strengthened. These are enough signs of trouble for the regime's stability. The process of collapse of the Kim Jong-il regime may have begun. What is deceiving is that "the regime has skillfully managed to stave off collapse, but this has only prolonged the inevitable . . . When collapse occurs, it will almost certainly catch everyone, including Pyongyang's elites, off guard."²⁸ The inevitable, however, would not necessar-



ily involve the North Korean people's will in the near to medium future. Rather it will be a prolonged process of political struggle at the top between the military and communist party elites. It is difficult to predict whether such a struggle will eventually lead to unification with the collapse of the North Korean state or a continuation of the North Korean state with a different kind of regime. One could expect a change to an authoritarian regime, rigid enough to suppress a people's revolution, but amenable to certain reforms and outside cooperation. It is imperative that the international community pay close attention to the important changes about to happen in Pyongyang. Yet, one needs to be patient in expecting complete freedom for the North Korean people as they face far more difficult conditions than their Middle Eastern counterparts. At a minimum, whether through group leadership or the rise of a new individual, the change may be near and bring an end to the totalitarian regime in North Korea. That will be a good beginning for the people of North Korea. ■

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Notes

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