

Another Perfect Storm?

Key Predictors of Rapid Change in North Korea

Ben Habib

Flinders University
School of Political and International Studies

GPO Box 2100
Adelaide, SA, 5001
Australia

Tel: 61 8 8201 3518
Email: habi0015@flinders.edu.au

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Abstract

Previous predictions of regime collapse in North Korea proved wrong because they over-emphasised economic weakness without considering the strength of other dimensions of the state. Rapid internal change is more likely to be detected by monitoring key leverage points in the North's political economy. This paper identifies four leverage points that merit close observation: (1) an increase in the annual food shortage may lead to similar institutional failures as those experienced during the famine period. This may be caused by another series of natural disasters, or, less, likely, by a withdrawal of international aid. (2) A relaxation of informational controls would give the population a basis to compare their political system with those of other countries, which could lead to the wholesale rejection of the ruling ideology and the growth of alternative leadership options. (3) Endemic corruption may lead to the erosion of social control mechanisms if citizens are able to circumvent restrictions or get out of trouble by buying off officials. (4) The next leadership transition may see a power struggle develop if the designated successor has not built a patronage network and power base that is powerful enough to enable him to decisively grasp the reins of power. Kim Jong-Il maintains power in spite of these problems by coopting regime elites and by employing the threat or use of force to preserve control. Change at any one of the key leverage points could compromise the coercive apparatus and elite patronage networks, sparking wider systemic change.

Introduction

Predictions of state collapse during the 1990s proved inaccurate because it was assumed that economic collapse would lead directly to state collapse, without taking into account the strength of other dimensions of the North Korean state. The task of prediction itself is fraught with difficulty due to the complexity of inter-related variables that one must consider. Rather than chart possible futures, this paper will identify key leverage points in the North's political economy that are likely bellwethers for wider systemic change. North Korea's political economy is analysed here using Barry Buzan's three interlinked components of the state: its physical, ideational and institutional bases. Each dimension has an important weakness that forms the basis for a key leverage point. In this manner an over-emphasis on the economic dimension can be avoided, providing a more rounded and reliable basis for prediction.

Four important leverage points are identified in this paper that merit close observation: First, an increase in the annual food shortage may lead to similar institutional failures as those experienced during the famine period. This may be caused by another series of natural disasters, or, less, likely, by a withdrawal of international aid. Second, a relaxation of informational controls would give the population a basis to compare their political system with those of other countries, which could lead to the wholesale rejection of the ruling ideology and the growth of alternative leadership options. Third, endemic corruption may lead to the erosion of social control mechanisms if citizens are able to circumvent restrictions or get out of trouble by buying off officials. Fourth, the next leadership transition may see a power struggle develop if the designated successor has not built a patronage network and power base that is powerful enough to enable him to decisively grasp the reins of power.

Kim Jong-Il maintains power in spite of these potential problems by coopting regime elites and

by employing the threat or use of force to preserve control. Change at any one of the key leverage points could compromise the coercive apparatus and elite patronage networks, sparking wider systemic change.

Previous Predictions of Regime Collapse

The longevity of Kim Jong-Il's regime in North Korea has been a topic of much discussion since the Dear Leader rose to power in the mid-1990s. The 1990s saw a series of crises develop in North Korea, which many pundits cited as evidence of impending collapse. Kim Kyung-Won (1996) and Nicholas Eberstadt (1997), among others, believed that the primary driver of the regime's collapse would be its economic weakness. Marcus Noland (1997) on the other hand wrote that North Korea would "muddle through," making ad hoc adjustments to fix specific problems that were a step away from the status quo but not a movement toward systemic reform. The consensus has since shifted behind Noland's muddle through thesis, with most pundits agreeing that the regime will continue to survive by making limited changes to its economy, generating foreign exchange where it can through military and illicit exports, and extracting aid from the international community (Kim 2005; Eberstadt 2006; Noland 2006).

State collapse results from a complex interplay of local and global economic, political, social and environmental factors culminating in the implosion of government and structures of authority. The security and integrity of the physical base can no longer be provided for by state institutions as law and order dissolves into a Hobbesian state of anarchy. This is not the same thing as state failure, which is a functional failure of state institutions from which recovery is possible (Milliken and Krause 2002, 765; Yannis 2002, 822). North Korea teetered on the brink of state failure during the late 1990s when it was rocked by mutually reinforcing crises including natural disasters, rapid economic downturn, declining agricultural output and the failure of important

food distribution institutions and social control mechanisms. That it did not descend into state failure and systemic collapse is a testament to the strength of the coercive apparatus, the resilience of parallel economies and some timely international support.

Predicting futures for North Korea has proved difficult because the variables are too complex for all possible trajectories to be accurately mapped. Rather, analysts should identify key leverage points in the North's political economy which may be bellwethers for larger systemic changes in the North Korean state. This paper identifies some of the more important leverage points through a framework of analysis that utilises the three interlinked components of the state posited by Barry Buzan (1991).

Buzan divided the state conceptually into three primary interlinked components: the physical base, the idea of the state, and its institutions. A state's physical base includes its territory and population, as well as all natural and man-made resources within its defined territory (Buzan 1991, 90). The idea of the state is the distinctive idea—the legitimising paradigm—that lies at the heart of the regime's political identity (Buzan 1991, 70). The institutions of the state comprise the machinery of government, such as executive, legislative, administrative and judicial bodies which run the state (Buzan 1991, 82-3). The institutions of the state maintain dominion over its population and territory, a control materially subsidised by the physical base and legitimised by an overarching ideational framework. States within which all three components are well developed and inter-connected to sustain each other are usually stronger than states in which the three primary components are weaker (Holsti 1996, 84). Each of these interlinked dimensions needs to be in mutually reinforcing terminal decay for state collapse to occur, yet deterioration in any one dimension could signal the onset of important internal changes.

The Physical Base: Agriculture and Economy

The physical base of the North Korean state is vulnerable because of limitations on agriculture, energy shortages and management-related roadblocks to developing solutions to physical constraints. Yet in spite of these problems, the physical base remains tenuously intact. The regime currently is unable to feed the entire population and relies on international food aid to make up the shortfall. If an increase in this shortfall is not met by international donors it could place critical pressure on distributive institutions and even the regime elite.

Similarly a sustained period of natural disasters may place terminal stress on the state's food distribution organs and compromise elements of the coercive apparatus, permanently changing the economic relations of food and consumables should disaster occur before the regime is able to bridge the food shortfall through its own agricultural output and through foreign trade. A rapid withdrawal of foreign aid could have a similar effect, though Chinese and South Korean concerns about regime stability should see those governments continue food aid into the future. The Chinese would like to avoid the large social and economic costs of absorbing a large refugee influx from a collapsed North Korea (Scobell and Chambers 2005, 292), while the South Koreans are concerned about the hefty social and economic price tag of reunifying a collapsed Northern state into a unified Korea (Carpenter and Bandow 2004, 35). These considerations drive both countries robust economic support for the Kim regime and undermine attempts by the United States to pursue a hard line with Pyongyang.

Food Insecurity

Famine has been a historic feature of the Korean peninsula for many centuries due to the inhospitability of its topography and climate. North Korea has the world's smallest percentage of

arable land per person due to its mountainous terrain, while harsh winters limit the length of the growing season (Pinkston and Saunders 2003, 84-5). Some agricultural regions are flood-prone, eroding valuable topsoils and land reclaimed through mountain terracing. Floods and drought during 1995-98 contributed directly to a crisis in food production which the regime was unable to cope with, leading to a great famine referred to in North Korean propaganda as the “Arduous March” period.¹ Despite the propaganda, government measures to increase agricultural output have generally failed and exacerbated existing problems.

During the 1960s a system of industrial agriculture was introduced based on mechanisation, mass irrigation and the widespread use of chemicals. Over time this system experienced declining returns as soils became exhausted through over-production and excessive chemical use (Martin 2004, 161). The steady decline accelerated after the Soviet collapse, which ended the generous petroleum subsidies and created energy shortages that turned off the irrigation pumps and left farm machinery idle. The de-mechanised farming system deteriorated further during the Arduous March period, leaving a substantial food shortfall as agricultural output plummeted further. Though production has recovered somewhat the North remains dependent on food aid from international donors—principally South Korea, China and the United States, as well as international organisations such as the UN World Food Program—to fill a food shortfall of up to twenty percent (World Food Program 2006). Food insecurity is the regime’s great Achilles heel because shortages force continued reliance on foreign donors and demonstrate the weakness of its food distribution system.

The regime has been propped up since the famine by international food aid and energy subsidies.

¹ With typical dislocation from the brutal reality, a KCNA report from January 20, 1997, described the Arduous March as an opportunity: “to turn the present adversity into favourable conditions and valiantly advance toward the final victory is our strategy and tactics, the philosophy of life and victory and the spirit of the present “arduous march”.”

Kim Kyung-Won has argued that international aid—including food, energy subsidies and cash payments from South Korea—have been decisive in preventing the North's collapse. Kim states that cash payments made by the Hyundai group to the regime during 1999-2000 amounted to approximately twenty percent of its total foreign exchange earnings, a decisive injection of funds at the regime's weakest moment (Kim 2005, 57). Energy shortages have been eased by fuel subsidies from China, though by no means is the fuel supply completely reliable. The cautious optimism with regard to the North's economic health must be tempered by stressing that improvements have been made on the back of inputs of aid from the international community, particularly from South Korea and China, which has become an important input into the North's economy. The North could again become vulnerable to economic distress should these inputs be withdrawn, threatening the well-being of a large portion of the population and the breakdown of state institutions (Marinov 2005, 804).

The famine forced the regime to tolerate internal travel to an increased extent if it allowed people to be fed, with corrupt low-level officials benefiting from facilitating the movement of illegal travellers (Hwang 1997). Domestic surveillance became more difficult as people were able to move around the country more freely. In each case the totalitarian controls imposed by agricultural collectivisation, food rationing and travel restrictions were undermined (Scobell 2006, 35; Snyder 2000, 520). The Public Distribution System (PDS) imploded under the strain of food shortage and crumbling distribution infrastructure, which was emasculated by fuel shortages. The primacy of the command economy was weakened by the growth of private farmers markets. The proliferation of internally displaced persons foraging for food destabilised the strict system of travel restrictions which kept people rooted in one location. Localisation traditionally kept individuals isolated and made surveillance and social control easier for the coercive organisations.

The North has not yet fully recovered from the famine period and it is possible that another

sustained period of climatic disasters of similar scale to the Arduous March period, or the sudden withdrawal of international aid, could be disastrous. Maintenance of Military-first Politics requires the mobilisation of the nation's productive and industrial capacities to preferentially service the military. The great famine of the mid-1990s led to starvation amongst the peasantry and those in the population not linked explicitly to the party or military, and least able to adjust to tightening economic conditions by producing their own food or selling their own labour in exchange for food (Natsios 1999, 1). The international community has yet to see how Kim Jong-II maintains regime stability during a time when the agricultural and industrial capacity servicing the military and party elite has been impinged upon by calamitous natural events or by international donor fatigue.

The apparent stability of the regime through the late 1990s could be a sign that the famine did not impact on the elite enough to compromise their loyalty to Kim Jong-II. A sustained agricultural crisis, beyond the already tenuous position of food shortfall, may eventually reach beyond the margins of society to impact on the elite. It is not clear however what minimum level of resource procurement is necessary to sustain the elite and at what point of erosion a backlash against the leadership may occur (Snyder 2000, 527-8). If the agricultural system is terminally damaged or critically restricted such that elite patronage networks are compromised for a significant length of time, key figures may begin to see support for the status quo as a losing gambit.

The Weak Economy

The North's industrial infrastructure exists in a dilapidated state. Kim Il-Sung originally based the North's economic development on heavy industry, which was initially successful but became a liability as the national economy grew more complex (Kim 1973, 129; French 2005, 77-8). Heavy industry, like mechanised agriculture, is energy-intensive and sensitive to petroleum

shortages. Bottlenecks in industrial production are often created by fuel shortages that shut down factories and the transportation infrastructure, decreasing the availability of manufactured goods and slowing the supply of components to other factories (French 2005, 100-1; Brown 2006). Many factories have closed down altogether because consistent shutdowns and resource shortages have made continued operation pointless.

The North's industrial decay was stimulated by systemic inefficiencies in the central planning mechanism that became terminal during the 1970s. There were four fundamental problems common to centrally-planned socialist economies, all of which applied to North Korea and all of which became noticeable after the initial gains of the post-Korean War reconstruction period: First, the central bureaucracy could not process and act upon the huge volume of micro-economic information generated in the planning process, leading to distortions in the planning orders. Second, the necessary devolution of responsibility necessary in central planning made coordination of action between lower units of the hierarchy very difficult. Third, unreliable information and bureaucratic inefficiency inevitably led to production targets incongruent with demand and mismatches of production and the supply of resources. Fourth, the central bureaucracy became either ignorant of systemic malfunctions or incapable of correcting them because of the dysfunctional nature of the system itself (Nove 1979, 155-6).

Because of the sheer size and complexity of planning for the national economy the central bureaucracy devolves the planning process to a series of lower bureaucratic units. The national plan is divided between government ministries, who further break down plan orders for the directorates under their jurisdiction. Finally the directorates disaggregate orders into specific plans for individual productive enterprises (Kornai 1992, 113-4). The process of disaggregation increases the likelihood of distortions in the planning matrix and enormous material wastage of manpower and resources. Former North Korean official Ko Young-Hwan, who defected to South

Korea in 1991, recalled a consultative meeting of the State Administrative Council in 1988 that illustrates a classic bottleneck scenario and its consequent ripple effect throughout an entire supply chain:

The meeting participants discussed the causes of economic difficulties and groped for ways of solving them...Fountain pens, ones that university students use for writing, you know, were in short supply. The participants asked the director of the fountain pen plant why he had not produced fountain pens. He replied that he had not been supplied with metallurgical materials. They asked the director of the steel mill why he had failed to supply the fountain pen plant with materials. He said: Because I did not get any iron ore from the smelter. The director of the smelter said he had not gotten ore from the mine. The responsible official at the mine said: I produced some, but rail transportation was not available to the smelter. The railways minister was then summoned and asked: Why did you not transport the mineral ore? He said: Because we did not get any railroad ties from the Forestry Ministry. The Forestry Ministry replied that it did not have any gas to produce timber (Oh and Hassig 2000, 58).

Energy shortages and systemic misallocation have decimated the country's industrial sector. Not only do they represent a major obstacle to improving production in both the industrial and agricultural sectors, but they were the fissures at which these sectors and their associated institutions broke down during the famine period.

Parallel Economies

The foreign threat posed by the United States, to varying degrees real and hyped, has spurred mobilisation of North Korea into a garrison state under the rubric of *Military-first Politics*. Military-first Politics is the state's economic organising principle with the military at its centre

(Kim 2006; Pinkston 2006, 3; Vorontsov 2006). The North's sizeable conventional forces and its fledgling nuclear deterrent have created an enormous military economy which provisions this large fighting force.

It is commonly assumed that the North's military-industrial complex sucks resources and manpower away from the civilian economy into commercially unproductive activities (Quinones 2006, 93). However, the leadership regards the military economy as self-sustaining, as this statement from *Nodong Sinmun* (11 April 2003) suggests:

Once we lay the foundations for a powerful self-sustaining national defence industry, we will be able to rejuvenate all economic fields, to include light industry and agriculture and enhance the quality of people's lives.

The military is involved in the export of weapons and primary products as well as civilian infrastructure projects such as land reclamation, road building, agriculture, housing construction, and mining that add value to the society and decrease the military's negative impact on the economy (Koh 2005; Pollack 2005, 144). One could argue that in North Korea the civilian economy is becoming peripheral to the expansive garrison state military economy.

The weakness of the civilian economy is also counter-balanced by the illicit economy. North Korea's illicit economy is a lucrative source of foreign exchange encompassing activities such as narcotics production and distribution, counterfeiting, and money laundering (Chestnut 2005; Noland 2006). David Asher (2005) believes the illicit economy may account for between thirty and forty percent of the North's total exports, contributing to an even larger slice of total earnings. The parallel military and illicit economies are strengths of the North's physical base, providing a prop for the regime in the face of other challenges. Chronic economic distress has not led to complete economic implosion because of their robustness and ability to perform services and generate foreign exchange.

The Ideas of the State: Kimism, Juche and Military-first Politics

In North Korea the establishment of a communist state based on the Stalinist model in a land of strong traditional Confucian leanings has produced three ideational pillars—the Kim Il-Sung personality cult (Kimism), *Juche*, and Military-first Politics. Yet this ideational base is experiencing a growing divorce from reality and is potentially weak. The Kim Il-Sung personality cult is not as strong under Kim Jong-Il, while *Juche* self-sufficiency is being eroded by the country's poor economic state and reliance on international aid. Conversely, Military-first Politics has strengthened the state's ideational base because it properly reflects the entrenched position of the KPA as the state's most important institution as well as the strength of the military economy. However, public reverence for state ideology probably does not reflect true belief amongst the population. Maintenance of state ideology can continue while the elites have an interest in carrying out orders and backing the regime, but the façade could come crashing down if their interests diverge from that of the regime leadership.

Tight information controls have thus far prevented most North Koreans from learning about the outside world and forming a basis for comparison with their own society via a process of cognitive dissonance.² Along with strict controls on collective activities, information controls have prevented the mobilisation of visible opposition movements in spite of extreme hardship. The relaxation of informational controls could trigger a growing mass opposition to the regime. Changes in elite preferences and the level of penetration of information from abroad should be watched closely as harbingers of wider transformation.

² Cognitive dissonance occurs where a person encounters new information about a given topic that cannot be rationalised away by currently held belief and ideas, causing psychological discomfort. This discomfort leads the person to seek or develop new paradigms for interpreting that topic (Festinger 1962, 2).

Kimism and Juche

Kimism is a personality cult built around Kim Il-Sung as the Stalinist hero-leader, the patriarch who vanquished the people's enemies and established a new way of life. This image is based heavily on Kim's exploits as an anti-Japanese guerrilla leader during the Japanese occupation.³ Yet Kimism is more complex than the label of Stalinist leadership cult suggests and is broader than the ideological core of communism. Kimism plays on the central Confucian ideas of political centralisation and obedience to authority that have been ascendant for six centuries on the Korean peninsula, to superimpose family and kinship loyalties with loyalty to the leader and the state (Buzo 1999, 48). Kimism provided the legitimising paradigm for the concentration of power in the hands of Kim Il-Sung, backed by a core elite whose rule was administered by the Korean Workers Party (KWP). Kim Jong-Il's legitimacy to rule is derived from the genealogical link to his father through Confucian notions of filial piety and ancestor worship of Kim as the patriarch of the North Korean state (Snyder 2000, 519; Moon and Takesada 2001, 380).

Juche is a philosophy of self-reliance and insularity, of survivalism and powerful post-colonial ethnocentrism, not surprising for a country surrounded by great powers and wounded by memories of colonial subordination (Cumings 1993, 213-4; French 2005, 30-1). Its precise definition is hard to define, perhaps because over time it has been subtly reinterpreted to legitimise changing regime policies. The core goals of *Juche* are the maintenance of a thriving self-reliant national economy operating in a secure environment, guarded by indigenous defence forces (Park 2002, 20-7). To these ends *Juche* has legitimised the continued operation of the North's centrally planned economy, isolated from the global marketplace, around which a highly garrison state has developed. One can see why the legend of the old Manchurian guerrilla clique

³ Official propaganda regularly features heroic stories of the feats of Kim's partisans in Manchuria, as this excerpt from a KCNA news article (18 December 2006) shows: "The theory on the people's guerrilla warfare reflected the unswerving will of the President to defeat the Japanese imperialists with the united strength of the Korean people and achieve the liberation of the country at any cost."

has been reified as the model for *Juche*: the guerrillas bravely fought to secure the homeland from foreign marauders, in difficult circumstances with little assistance (according to the myth). The Korean Peoples Army (KPA) assumed the mantle of heroic defender of modern North Korea, safeguarding the country from external aggression so the internal economy could flourish.

The KPA has become the most important institution in North Korean society, at the pinnacle of which sits Kim Il-Sung as commander-in-chief, the hero-leader, the father figure, the mantle inherited by Kim Jong-Il (French 2005, 30-1). With the advent of the doctrine Military-first Politics the KPA has superseded the KWP as the leading institution of the Korean communist revolution, a role in communist societies typically assumed by the ruling party on behalf of the working class. This represented an evolution of *Juche* ideology, maintaining most of *Juche*'s component ideas but with the military as its centrepiece (Koh 2005).⁴

Weakness of Ideational Pillars

The strength of these ideational pillars may be beginning to fade. Kim Il-Sung is still much loved but this has not automatically translated into veneration for Kim Jong-Il. Defectors are unanimous in their respect and affection for Kim Il-Sung, but few can be found with any positive thoughts about Kim Jong-Il (Oh and Hassig 2000, 35-6). The power of the ideational pillars is maintained through coercion and citizens outwardly express their belief in the system to avoid punishment. The need for such heavy coercion is an indication that the ideational pillars are weak and lack true legitimacy. Should the coercive apparatus weaken, the legitimating ideas of

⁴ The idea first entered public consciousness in 1995 when a series of articles in *Nodong Sinmun* indicated that the KPA had become the most important state organ in North Korea, though the specific term itself did not enter the official lexicon until 1999 when it was outlined in a new year's day editorial in *Nodong Sinmun* entitled "Let Us Make This Year Shine as a Turning Point in Building a Powerful and Prosperous Nation." An article in the same publication in December 2003 titled "Essential Attributes of Military-First Politics" marked the ascension of military first politics to the status of state ideology, from which time it has been the primary organising philosophy of the North Korean state (Koh 2005).

the state may rapidly crumble.

It is unimaginable that one would publicly express dissenting or revisionist views regarding the ideas of state. Apart from fear of the coercive institutions, the average worker or farmer is probably engaged in the often desperate struggle for subsistence, which, as North Korean defector and gulag survivor Kang Chol-Hwan has attested, does not make them good potential revolutionaries (Snyder 2000, 518; Kang and Rigoulot 2001, 141). They have little energy to ponder their doubts about the system and no avenue in which to discuss their thoughts with others, which led them to abandon political thought altogether and acquiesce under the official dogma (Oh and Hassig 2000, 37). Even the thought of raising questions in one's own mind is a cross too heavy to bear in such a repressive environment and as survival is the leading imperative, most North Koreans avoid the complication of pondering subversive questions.

North Korea's elites face a similar dilemma to the rank and file in facing the complications of harbouring internal doubts, yet they have the blessing and the curse of being better informed than the masses. The elite, comprising several thousand top party and military officials, have access to restricted government publications featuring international and domestic news while some of their number may even have travelled abroad for education or official business. Such officials probably understand the contradictions of official ideology and are non-believers, and recognise the glaring practical problems facing the regime, but as company men and women, staunch nationalists or active rent-seekers, are wedded to the status quo (Oh and Hassig 2000, 38). These people may have a more acute understanding of the country's problems and contradictions, but they have even less freedom to discuss such issues because they are subjected to even greater internal surveillance than the masses (Oh and Hassig 2000, 38-9). Thus it is likely that regime elites, in the same vein as the general public, disengage themselves from subversive political thought to avoid the discomfort facing intractable contradictions over which they have negligible

control.

If doubters cannot discuss their doubts with others then collective action is limited and no organised opposition can develop. Without organised opposition and debate there can be no reinterpretation of national myths and philosophies, which perpetuates the strong veneer of pro-regime mass consensus. Under such circumstances it is difficult to see how alternative moral authority options can evolve within North Korea itself.

This does not mean however that the national myths and philosophies enjoy true legitimacy amongst the population. The reservoir of pent-up public frustration with the regime may indeed be vast. The period leading up to the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe gives us clues to look for in assessing the stability of the coercive apparatus and the possibility of rapid change in North Korea (Buzan 1991, 81). Analysts should look for the loosening of informational controls and a growing space for careful dissent as a sign that doubts can be expressed publicly as the embryonic stage of mass mobilisation. Similarly, it should be taken as a sign of impending change if regime officials begin to discard the ritual ideas of Juche in favour of implementing new managerial techniques and economic programs (Maier 1997, 4).

Information Controls

It is almost inconceivable to the Western mind that North Korean citizens would not harbour private doubts in the face of the glaring problems and privations facing their country. Mass mobilisation, visible in protests and acts of civil disobedience are perhaps one of the most visible signs of state weakness, showing that a government has lost its popular legitimacy (Holsti 1996, 118-9; Deane 2005, 6). Yet there is no evidence that popular resistance to the regime is growing as was found to be the case in East Germany leading up to the fall of the Berlin Wall (Oh and

Hassig 2000, 34).

An important difference lies in the isolation of North Koreans from information about the outside world. It is almost impossible for the average North Korean to make judgements about the strengths and weaknesses of their own society without reliable information about other countries as a standard for comparison (Kim 2005, 58). Without a basis for comparison, private doubts are less likely to find nourishment on alternative ideologies from which to build a blueprint for social change. This is why the relaxation of informational controls is a key indicator of approaching political change as it could be a sign that mass mobilisation may be percolating below the surface.

The regime's tight informational controls clearly indicate that it fears information seeping into the country from outside, especially from South Korea. This fear is stated clearly in this excerpt from *Nodong Sinmun* (20 April 2003):

It is the imperialist's old trick to carry out ideological and cultural infiltration prior to their launching of an aggression openly. Their bourgeois ideology and culture are reactionary toxins to paralyse people's ideological consciousness. Through such infiltration, they try to paralyse the independent consciousness of other nations and make them spineless. At the same time, they work to create illusions about capitalism and promote lifestyles among them based on the law of the jungle, in an attempt to induce the collapse of socialist and progressive nations. The ideological and cultural infiltration is their silent, crafty and villainous method of aggression, intervention and domination (Eberstadt 2006, 286).

Yet the penetration of information technologies into North Korea is beginning to increase. Some citizens have access to radios that have been recalibrated to pick up broadcasts from South Korea,

risking incarceration to listen to foreign broadcasts (Kang and Rigoulot 2001, 186).⁵ Citizens living in regions along the northern frontier can also access Chinese cell phone networks if they can afford a mobile phone. Modern information technology is capable of breaking down barriers of information control, which could expose the growing divorce of official propaganda from reality and threaten the legitimacy of the regime.

Holsti warns that authoritarian rule based on coercion does not automatically equate to authority to rule, but rather is a sign of the inherent weakness and illegitimacy of a ruling regime (Holsti 1996, 104). The divorce of state propaganda from reality would be exposed leading to civil discontent, which the regime could acquiesce to or quell with overt violence. A point may come where the tide of popular public dissent may overwhelm the ability of the coercive apparatus to contain it by force, as was the case in Eastern Europe in 1989 (Maier 1997, 108). A change in information controls should be watched closely as a key signpost of regime vulnerability.

The Institutions of the North Korean State

North Korea's institutional base is relatively strong compared with its physical and ideational bases, which accounts for the state's ability to withstand prolonged crisis. However, because of the underlying weakness of its legitimating ideas the regime elicits compliance from the population by force, which could be compromised if the coercive apparatus is weakened. Endemic corruption is becoming a problem because it is allowing people to circumvent social controls by paying bribes to state officials, while the regime may be at its most vulnerable during

⁵ Kang and Rigoulot, *The Aquariums of Pyongyang: Ten Years in a North Korean Gulag*, p. 186. North Korean defector Kang Chol-Hwan (2001, 186) described the impact on his worldview of hearing radio broadcasts from South Korea: "Listening to the radio gave us the words we needed to express our dissatisfaction. Every program, each new discovery, helped us tear a little freer from the enveloping world of deception. Knowledge that there was a counterpoint to official reality was already a kind of escape, one that could exhilarate as well as confuse. It is difficult to explain, for example, the emotions we felt on hearing it demonstrated, proof positive, that the North had actually started the Korean War, not the American imperialists, as we had always been told."

the next leadership transition if the abrupt death or removal of Kim Jong-II occurs before the succession contest has been decided.

Primary Institutions: The Party and the Military

The central ideas of the state mean very little without the backing of state institutions. They are intertwined in a necessary symbiosis in which institutions put ideas into practice and ideas provide institutions with definition and purpose (Buzan 1991, 82-3, 86). Kim Jong-II has successfully preserved power thanks to the strength of social controls and his control over the institutions that administer them. The elite has been coopted and controlled by Kim Jong-II to ensure that military factions do not break away and revolt against the leadership, while the coercive apparatus works to prevent organised collective action. The threat of punishment provides enormous disincentives for individuals to challenge the system.

Kim exercises control through two primary institutions—the KWP and the KPA—which he coordinates through the vehicle of the National Defence Commission, a body he established and cultivated during the early 1990s to implement Military-first Politics and govern over the large number of disparate state organs (Scobell 2006, 5). The party penetrates social subgroups via guidance committees, which occur at all levels of society and always feature a local cadre as a key member (Asmolov 2005, 33). The committees function as a mechanism of surveillance ensuring there is virtually no organised collective unit or activity that is beyond the power of the party. Kim Jong-II has consolidated his power over the KWP by assuming leadership of the Central Committee and thus the Politburo and the Secretariat, the three key organisations within the party. However under Kim Jong-II the Party has ceased to be the primary organ of state power, a mantle which has shifted to the military.

The structure of defence organisations is centred on the National Defence Commission, of which Kim Jong-Il is Chairman (Scobell 2006, 5). His control diffuses to all levels through a series of overlapping command structures and penetration with party cadres, forming an extensive internal surveillance network. For example, a military commander must gain approval for and report on all activities to an overseeing political officer from the Party, who reports back to the KWP Central Committee (Jeon 2000, 769). Competition between high ranking generals is also fostered to keep the military hierarchy under the leader's wing and inhibit institutional unity (Jeon 2000, 771). Despite being usurped in overall institutional importance, the KWP continues to exercise an important level of influence over military activities on behalf of the Dear Leader.

The Coercive Apparatus

The regime's coercive apparatus has passive and active components. Status and self-censorship comprise the passive layer of social control. The party controls career advancement, access to higher education, health care, food supplies and party membership on the basis of political reliability and family background (US Library of Congress 1993). Indeed the prospect of career advancement works as both carrot and stick in acculturating party members and prospective cadres into appropriate behaviour. Executing commands from above to the highest precision is good for career advancement; excessive questioning and overt disloyalty are not (Buzo 1999, 29). The rewards of advancement in the party, combined with the consequences of dissent or failure produce a stifling pressure toward self-censorship and depoliticisation amongst individual party members.

Active social controls are maintained by the internal security services, who report directly to Kim Jong-Il. The most notorious coercive body is the State Safety and Security Agency, which is well known for the disappearance, torture and execution of political prisoners, as well as the use of

collective punishment against the families and friends of transgressors (Buzo 1999, 29; Amnesty International 2006). Should an individual be arrested for political crimes against the state, their entire family would be incarcerated in “re-education” camps to weed out ideological impurity and to deter others from engaging in anti-regime behaviour.⁶ There are many prison camps scattered through North Korea, placed in locations chosen for their remoteness and difficult terrain. The punishments, entry barriers and conformist pressures of the coercive apparatus decrease the likelihood of rebellious individuals rising to positions of influence.

Corruption

Legitimacy is threatened when public officials exploit their positions for personal gain and is often seen as a sign of state weakness (Holsti 1996, 93-4, 113-5). Once systematic corruption becomes the norm it is extremely difficult for reformist leaders to dismantle it. Many defectors from North Korea have testified that the level of corruption in North Korea is rampant and reaches to the highest levels of power. Many of them were able to escape the country by bribing state officials, including border guards and travel inspectors, to circumvent travel restrictions to reach and cross the Chinese border. There is even a growing suggestion that people can buy their way out of incarceration in the re-education camps (Human Rights Watch 2002, 10; Mansourov 2006, 55).

If money and self-enrichment are replacing fear of the coercive apparatus as behavioural motivation then the pillars of total social control may be weakening. The real danger of corruption is that coercive institutions will lose their power to compel through fear. The population will likely not revolt in disgust at endemic corruption, but rather use the greed of

⁶ For an eyewitness account of North Korea’s gulag system and collective punishment, see: Kang and Rigoulot, 2001, *The Aquariums of Pyongyang: Ten Years in a North Korean Gulag*.

public officials to circumvent social control mechanisms. State propaganda, which many people may already find suspect, may be questioned more publicly if the coercive apparatus ceases to guarantee the total public observance of state ideas. Thus endemic corruption could weaken North Korea's institutional and ideational bases.

Leadership Succession

The degree of personalised leadership is another factor that indicates relative state strength. In countries where personalised leadership has grown around a single dictatorial figure, augmented by a personality cult that blurs the distinction between regime and the state, the leader actively seeks to become more than a custodian of the state to become one and the same with the state itself (Holsti 1996, 105). North Korea under Kim Il-Sung, featuring the Kimist personality cult around the Great Leader, matched this description well. His rule was characterised by his patrimonial ties to key state organisations, frequent purging of rivals and dissenters, and a personalised hands-on approach to wielding power (Lankov 1995; 2002).

It has often been the case that such personalised regimes collapse when the dictator dies or is removed from power because the institutions of the state become unable to function without the direct input of the dictator. Indeed North Korea's previous leadership change was unique among totalitarian states in that Kim Jong-Il was able to assume power of a totalitarian system relatively undiminished by the death of its founder. During a typical leadership transition it is common for a new leader's power and influence to be limited by his under-developed patronage network, while state ideology tends to weaken and the apparatus of terror and coercion ceases to be all-pervasive (Scobell 2005, 248).

There appear to be two primary reasons why this erosion of totalitarian strength did not happen in

North Korea: first, Kim Jong-Il was groomed for the leadership for almost two decades before he assumed power. During this period he developed his own power base and patronage network within the institutions of state independent of those of his father, ultimately finding expression in the Military-first Politics doctrine after his ascension to power (Cumings 1997, 407; Oh and Hassig 2000, 4). Second, as Kim Il-Sung's son, Kim Jong-Il derived his legitimacy as rightful heir from the distinctly Confucian emphasis on the filial link to the dynastic founder (Snyder 2000, 520). The strong Confucian social hierarchy allowed Kim Jong-Il to command a higher level of authority than would otherwise have been possible for a new leader elsewhere. These two factors were decisive in ensuring a smooth leadership transition for Kim Jong-Il, though the process of leadership transition may not be as smooth next time round.

Kim Jong-Il has many offspring from which to choose a successor, including at least three sons and two daughters (Jensen 2005, 6; Choi 2006). The indications are that preparations are being made to groom a successor, but it is not yet apparent to the international community which of Kim's children is being groomed. As these candidates get older they will begin to establish their own institutional attachments and personal loyalties, which will grow into power bases and then into legitimate claims to future leadership. Alexandre Mansourov (2006, 50-1) has suggested that the process of battling for "future estates" has already begun, though a clear successor has yet to emerge. It is possible Kim Jong-Il may announce his successor at the next KWP National Convention to be held sometime during 2007-08 (Choi 2006). The absence of a clear favourite may become a problem should Kim Jong-Il's leadership end suddenly, because the patronage networks of potential successors may be under-developed and the Confucian filial link to Kim Il-Sung will have diminished in strength. Should potential successors be unready to assert control, factionalism and a bloody contest amongst competing candidates may result.

Conclusion

Previous predictions of regime collapse in North Korea proved wrong because they over-emphasised economic weakness without considering the strength of other dimensions of the state. Rapid internal change is more likely to be detected if close attention is paid to key leverage points in the North's political economy. This paper has identified four leverage points that merit close observation: First, an increase in the annual food shortage may lead to similar institutional failures as those experienced during the famine period. This may be caused by another series of natural disasters, or, less, likely, by a withdrawal of international food aid. Second, a relaxation of informational controls would give the population a basis to compare their political system with those of other countries, which could lead to the wholesale rejection of the ruling ideology and the growth of alternative leadership options. Third, endemic corruption may lead to the erosion of social control mechanisms if citizens are able to circumvent restrictions or get out of trouble by buying off officials. Fourth, the next leadership transition may see a power struggle develop if the designated successor has not built a patronage network and power base that is powerful enough to enable him to decisively grasp the reins of power.

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