



North Korea, Quo Vadis?

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North Korean politics appears neither irrational nor unpredictable: the logic of its actions may at first seem opaque, but it nonetheless displays its own rationale and patterns. – North Korea: a ruthless political actor, now under the leadership of Kim Jong-Un who inherited the regime's leadership from his father and "Supreme Leader", Kim Jong-Il, in 2011. The country's policy is based on its ongoing political agenda of (nuclear) brinkmanship, a true threat to the world – or at least that's how the Western hemisphere sees it. Yet our factual knowledge of this post-Leninist and totalitarian regime is extremely limited and relatively distorted; it is largely circumstantial evidence and judgmental speculation that accounts for our perception of this East Asian state. Northeast Asia (China, Japan, South and North Korea, Taiwan) is a region dominated by the legacy of the Cold War. The North Korean leadership has indeed established its priorities, primarily its isolationist orientation, but in the long term the regime cannot survive without external stimulus. Most importantly,

even in a long-term, non-violent and gradual transformation of North Korea considerable danger can ultimately result in the demise of the regime. Apart from few signs of a North Korean "civil society", currently only the army might have the resources to see through a regime change. In the meantime, the strategies of isolationism as well as tight control of the media remain as fundamental cornerstones of the regime. A close-knit network of social control has been established and access to the internet for the most part is limited to the regime's entrusted cadre.

1. Dawning of a North Korean "Civil Society"? [1]

North Korea is widely perceived as a ruthless political actor, now under the leadership of Kim Jong-Un who has inherited the regime's leadership from his father and "Supreme Leader", Kim Jong-Il, in 2011, in guided by its political agenda of (nuclear) brinkmanship, a true threat to the world –or at least that's how the Western hemisphere sees it. Despite, or perhaps because of, the possible implications of reform measures, the potential threat of armed conflict should not be overlooked. In the scientific community, it is widely assumed that if that happens, nobody will be immune to the consequences throughout the whole region. (cf. Ahn 2001: 166) Secondly, even in a long-term, non-violent and gradual transformation of North Korea considerable danger can be seen since there would be no going back after having reached a certain point of opening. (cf. Bluth 2008: 191) Ultimately, even transformation over the long-term involves the risk of a sudden and regime-change and out-of-control war: a power vacuum in North Korea after a collapse may not be without risk due to its "civil society" being in its infancy and a political opposition that does not seem to exist yet.

As the "civil society" in North Korea in its current state is by no means comparable to "Western standards" and as political opposition has yet to emerge, the roots of North Korea's totalitarianism are often difficult for

outsiders to understand. Frank makes a very valid point "[while it is quite true that] The state of North Korea deviates in many respects from Western norms regarding an institutional framework, or what Oliver Williamson has termed the 'rules of the game in a society' [does] this make North Korea 'different'? Such an assumption would be fatal in many regards, since it ignores the many options and tools for understanding this society. Moreover, to claim that these do not apply to North Korea would be nothing less than to seriously question the relevance of all social science theories. Last but not least, it would mean denying the people of North Korea the condition of humanness. This would not only be factually wrong, but also highly cynical." (Frank 2010: Foreword; Stingeder 2010: 9)

In view of North Korean "(civil) society", any assessment should be highly differentiated. Insofar as "[...] 'civil society' is seen as a political-ideological battle on which very alternative concepts of order and development can emerge in society", (cf. Hirsch 2001: 19, translated from the German) there may be reason for cautious optimism. Currently, only few indicators of "political resistance" can be acknowledged, yet circumstantial evidence would suggest the first subtle indicator of a "civil society" in North Korea. In this context, North Korean market women in particular must be mentioned, as being apparently able to establish their own "power sphere" based upon on a specific "code" when faced with North Korea's maledominated social structure. Thus there are reports showing that in April 2008 thousands of market women in the city of Chongjin had publicly protested against the execution of 15 colleagues. An age restriction previously arranged by local officials seems to have been lifted as a result of the protests. By the end of 2007, the age limit for women allowed to engage in trade had been increased to 50 years. (cf. World Tribune 2008: Internet source) Consequently, this first seed of North Korean "civil society" could be interpreted here insofar as many young women decided to undermine official policy by cooperating with older women. Seemingly, these younger women made every effort to elude the official ban on trade. How much credence can be given to these rumor-based reports, it is still risky to assess at this stage. However, it seems

quite plausible that the 2002 reform measures have already started a development that is impossible to reverse. For this reason, it is quite possible that step by step and with accompanying economic relaxations, a "civil society" might slowly be arising. At this stage, however, the regime's systematic indoctrination and social control seem to prevent any political opposition from emerging.

The opaqueness of North Korea's "civil society" (due to lack of tangible scientific data) can be best compared with what little is known – or suspected – about the political "inner spheres" of the regime. The structure of the North Korean elite is illuminated by Mansourov's work in terms of spheres of influence around Kim Jong-il, and now by his son and successor Kim Jon Un. Accordingly, the North Korean government is regarded as an organized set of competing and sometimes less rigid structural elements, whose procedure seems to be characterized by sluggish bureaucracy. These rigid structures are on the one hand causing an inherent potential of ambiguous and contradictory mutual policy decisions. On the other hand, these structures would regularly become involved in the power struggles of competing clans and would be utilized in accordance with their specific power goals. In North Korean clans, the circles of power are focused on Kim Jong Un. The elitist court of North Korea concentrated in Pyongyang, on the other hand, consists of six families in direct relationship to the regime. An elite circle that is constantly vying for the leader's attention. This power dynamic in place is resulting in permanent and dynastically-dominated fight for privileges and positions, which are likely to be advantageous from each of the competing parties viewpoint. The North's power elite structure has thus neither been consistent, nor would it be justified to define it as a "black box" in the sense of a complex and opaque system. There are five powerful political forces in the country, permeating all spheres of political life: the "Establishment" around the preservation of national security, the "Old Guard", the "Technocrats", "Local Elites" and the so-called "Foreign Wind". The last is composed of stakeholders around Korean exiles or Koreans born abroad (with roots in Korea), who actually live in China, Japan, Russia, USA and South Korea. These power competitors are

intending, therefore, to gain influence over Kim Jong Un's family clan. They are anxious to achieve the vision of the respective national development as well as to secure a "slice of the cake" for themselves. The suspected exercise of influence towards the dynastic "family farm" is crowned by various successes in the short run. (cf. Mansourov 2006: 37–54)

2. Control of the Media

In addition to the aforementioned internal "power spheres" as one of the regime's political cornerstones, North Korean isolationism still plays a central role in the eyes of the regime. This policy is aimed at systematically controlling its people. International travel is still exclusively reserved for the diplomatic sector and all travel plans must be approved in advance by regime officials. Furthermore, access to the telephone and Internet is only granted to the elite. Up to date, citizens of the country have virtually no access to news that has not passed through the regime's censorship and propaganda machinery. Even radio reception is restricted through statutory manipulated radio sets, thus radio news also seems part of the regime's propaganda apparatus. (cf. Becker 2005: 132) According to a recent news bulletin on the website North Korean Tech, several private radio stations have been able to broadcast, in spite of cloud screening activities by the North Korean regime: "Some are jammed by North Korea making reception difficult – but not impossible – inside the country." (cf. Williams, North Korea Tech 2013: Internet source)

What is more, an extremely close-knit network of social control has been established by the regime in order to ensure that divergent thinking and protest behavior does not remain hidden and can be nipped in the bud.

Bluth illustrates this by means of the failed project to connect the rail network of North and South Korea. The military may have vetoed the project. In this context, and as further evidence of disparities within the North Korean elite, a study by the International Institute for Strategic Studies might be worth mentioning since the report indicates the

existence of power struggles between reformers and hardliners.(cf. ISS 2004, cited by Bluth 2008: 180–181).

Moreover, an alleged North Korean controversy surrounding the introduction of cell phones states another interesting media related incident: the faction of "the reformers" would first have been able to achieve political support for the initiative, which would have provided a limited availability of cell phones in North Korea. However, this decision would have been revised by the security forces shortly thereafter. In this context, it is worth underlining that despite some inconsistencies in political decision-making processes in North Korea, the full power of decision still may lie in Kim Jong Un's hands as the country's de facto dictator. From him, social control of the country would be so closely knit that no institution would be able to channel any dissatisfaction among the people. (cf. Bluth 2008: 180–181) This can be seen as a clear indication for the perpetual and strong underdevelopment of aforementioned North Korean "civil society".

A commitment to one of the many "reeducation camps" of the systematically organized North Korean camp system often results in long prison sentences and forced labor under harsh conditions. Furthermore, arrests supposedly justified by "political offenses" often result in the death of the detainee. A fundamental element of social pressure within North Korea's camp network is illustrated by the practice of "collective punishment": particularly in the case of arrests labeled as political crimes, the entire family of the accused is at risk of imprisonment. (cf. Becker 2005: 90) This being the case, a judicial system according to Western standards does not seem to exist in North Korea. There is also no evidence of due legal process.

3. Totalitarianism

In light of the aforementioned restrictions, from a political and particularly a civil and human rights perspective, one might question what philosophical and theoretical pillow the regime rests its totalitarianist

head on. In a nutshell, it is the principle of autarky and the entire Confucian-dynastic ideology. It is an ideology which has transformed itself from communism to a specific North Korean "conglomerate" forming the conceptual basis for the regime, while at the same time constituting the reason for the country's political and social isolationism. In addition, Kim Jong-Il's "prioritisation" of the military, which has been perpetuated by Kim Jong Un, has largely contributed to solidifying his aspirations of establishing a secured power base. Most remarkably, and despite the North Korean reform dilemma, this development has not yet led to the collapse of the regime. On the contrary, it can be asserted that without isolationism, the elitist circles of power would have to do without an integral power factor of vital importance for the survival of the regime: total control of North Korea. (cf. Stingeder 2010: 66-67)

Dogmatic leadership seems indeed to be theoretically substantiated by Juche. In North Korea, ideological "truth" is not debatable; it is self-explanatory and perceived as flawless. (cf. Stingeder 2010: 45) But what is behind this Idea of Juche? In fact, Korean historical heritage shapes the perception of the other's viewpoint, limiting and reserving one's own perspective on the Korean people's proclaimed "true heritage". (cf. Bluth 2008: 178) Paternalistic and neo-Confucian concepts were subsequently an integral part of the development of Juche ideology: one major feature is the so-called "father thought" in Confucianism. This principle manifests itself in a belief in the infallible discernment of certain individuals. (cf. Bluth 2008: *ibid.* and cf. Becker 2005: 76)

4. Roots, Reforms and Risks

Considering the tight political and civil limitations enforced by the North Korean regime and founded on the Juche philosophy, an idea which is widely accepted and deeply rooted in North Korea's socio-political culture up to date, a detailed assessment of North Korea's civilian population is currently and still very problematic. Hence, a serious study and empirical evaluation would require unchecked access to the population as well as the major state archives in order to acquire empirical data.

It would seem that the commitment of the population is largely absent at the present time. For this reason, probably the army alone has the resources to achieve a regime change, which could most likely only be initiated from inside the system. Whilst North Korean economic orientation always seems to be guided by the Juche idea, North Korea's claim to be autonomous seems nonexistent in policy: North Korea is still dependent on foreign aid to ensure adequate supplies, which otherwise could ultimately result in the population's malnutrition. (cf. Quinones 2006: 94)

Most importantly, the perpetuation of a secluded political system is the highest priority for the regime; this constellation is supported by a slew of propaganda. And with great certainty, the economy remains key for the fate of North Korea and its current regime. Around the turn of the century, according to Eberstadt, North Korea had in fact been the only country whose economy was completely disconnected from the capital value of money. Besides North Korea, only during the reign of the Khmer in Cambodia, money as means of bartering had been completely abolished. Nevertheless, introducing the value of money due to North Korea's economic reforms should be seen a "condition sine qua non" for reviving languishing North Korean planned economy mechanisms. (cf. Eberstadt 2006: 290) Ultimately, Eberstadt sees a "[a] planned economy without planning." (Kimura 1994: cited by Eberstadt 2006: 291)

The historic roots of the immanent deteriorated economic status of North Korea can be traced back to the dissolution of the Soviet Union: This assumption is substantiated by historical developments: the collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in a fundamental power-political change for North Korea, since the regime was henceforth no longer under the protection of a "superpower". Moreover, from the mid-1990s Russia started to normalize its relations with South Korea, which led to increasing trade volume between Russia and the South. At the same time, support from China and Russia for North Korea decreased or dried up entirely. (cf. Kang 2003: 57 et seq., cited by Stingeder 2010: 71) At present, economic development has stalled for the most part, but as a result of

isolationistic framework conditions. The fact that most foreign investors (except South Korea and China) still remain outside the country illustrates North Korea's continued fragile economic situation. The regime has continuously disallowed the structural reform of the eroded economic system. Minor adaptations have been given priority, such as price adjustments. Although the regime reacted by introducing market-based reform measures between 2002 and 2003, (cf. Becker 2005: 264, cf. Mansourov 2006: 47–48) and the economic situation remains virtually unchanged and precarious. To date, it is shaped by a need for foreign investment, a lack of infrastructure and an immense inflationary spiral. (cf. Stingeder 2010: 57–58) Despite some slight improvements and reports about more money flowing into the country as well as initial signs "tiny but growing middle class" (NPR.org 2013: Internet source), North Korea's overall economic conditions and political framework remain suboptimal (cf. Kihl 2006: 14 et seq.). The economic situation in North Korea to date must indeed be regarded as a vicious circle.

5. North Korea, Quo vadis?

In light of recent events in North Korea – the execution and removal of Mr Jang, one of the most senior cadre members of the regime and Kim Jong Un's uncle – the regime's current leader has succeeded in giving the outside world an image of North Korea that is even more chilling and unpredictable than before. Why purge a senior Politburo member with the rank of general in the North's army? Why was one of the central figures in securing Kim Jong Un's succession executed? As *The Economist*, a news magazine, in a recent commentary states, the most surprising aspect of Mr Jang's execution is the broad range of public accusation, despite his achievements for Kim Jong Un: "such anti-party, counter-revolutionary factional acts as gnawing at the unity and cohesion of the party, selling natural resources too cheaply; womanising [sic!]; being wined and dined at back parlours of deluxe restaurants; taking drugs;

squandering foreign currency in casinos." (The Economist 2013: 52 and ibid: Internet source)

Ultimately, I tend to agree with the Economist's point of view. Whilst a member of the regime's elite being corrupt and despotic should not come as a surprise, the fact that North Korea's media has openly crucified a former elite member of the regime most definitely should: "Soon afterwards the purge made the front pages and television news in North Korea, with scenes of the moment of his detention, at an enlarged meeting of the Politburo, where he was yanked from his seat in front of his comrades. China has more experience of this kind of theatre, from the vilifications campaigns of the Cultural Revolution to the juicy trial this year of Bo Xilai, a former Politburo member. North Korea, in contrast, has nearly always dispatched its disgraced cadres into silent oblivion." (cf. ibid.). I would therefore like to pose the question as to whether a new age of political PR could be dawning in North Korea. To put it more succinctly, I would like to talk about the elephant in the room by asking one question: can the public sacking of the regime's most senior officials be viewed as an indication of an emerging new style of (more unpredictable) power-prolonging leadership by Kim Jong Un? Ultimately, the public crucifixion could prove to be the initial sign of the regime's changing perception of its political relationship with China: "[Mr Jang] is said to have had ties to Chinese officials (selling them resources too cheaply, perhaps). [...] More conventionally, he is said to have been an advocate of the sort of reforms that China promotes, through the opening of more special economic zones." (cf. ibid). In other words, and viewed through the geo-political lens in the context of North Korea's relationship with China and North Korea, Mr Jang's dismissal could prove to be a significant political earthquake and therefore more than just a debut of the public crucifixion of regime officials.

In fact, China has been urging the North Korean regime to adapt by commencing economic reforms according to the Chinese example for quite some time now. Similarly, China has been hoping that North Korea will finally be able to overcome its isolationism through economic

reforms. (cf. Fritz 2004: 130, cited by Stingeder 2010: 56-57) In general and apart from Mr Jang's recent demise and purging under the auspices of Kim Jong Un, North Korea's military potential and economic development are both playing a key role for the entire region. The question remains as to whether North Korea's elite is willing to accept the risks of an opening and if it is also willing to cooperate with the international community in terms of disarmament and arms control. Another important aspect in terms of mutual political relations in the region is the fact that mutual trust on both sides is undeniably very low. And yet, North Korea continues to play its key role speaking of its part in the course of a remarkable tense geo-political constellation: US, Japan and South Korea on one hand, China and Russia on the other – and North Korea right in the middle – all of whom are pursuing their own interests and strategic objectives. Consequently, any political developments or military engagements on the peninsula are accompanied by immanent potential risks. Furthermore, a lasting solution to the crisis is not yet within reach. A key role in this context is whether Kim Jong-Il's heir will be supported by the military as was the case for Kim Jong-Il with his "army first" policy, which he initiated following Kim Il-sung's death in 1994 and his subsequent succession.

In terms of the geopolitical position, once again the remarkable geopolitical constellation on the peninsula should be emphasized: the US, Japan and South Korea on one hand, China and Russia on the other – and North Korea right in the middle – all of whom are pursuing their own interests and strategic objectives. Consequently, any political developments or military engagements on the peninsula are accompanied by immanent potential risks. (cf. Stingeder 2010: 113 and cf. Stingeder 2013: Internet source) Both the isolationism and media restriction strategies remain fundamental cornerstones of the regime for systematically controlling the North Korean people. As outlined, international travel is exclusively reserved to the diplomatic sector and access to the telephone and Internet is only granted to the elite. What is more, citizens of the country have virtually no access to news that has not passed through the regime's censorship and propaganda machinery.

In conclusion, any economic reform efforts which might have been applied in North Korea – from today's perspective – have not yet affected or improved the grave political restrictions on basic civil and human rights. Ultimately, the regime's fear of its own demise still manifests itself in a tight grasp on the media. It is safe to assume that "North Korea has one of the world's most repressive media environments." (Berger 2013: Internet source). In systematically limiting access to the media by the people of North Korea and flooding authorised media channels with propaganda, it hopes to choke political opposition and suppress weak signs of a "civil society" before any organised movement blossoms into something that would truly be capable of threatening the existence of the North Korean regime. The question now is whether in committing this first public crucifixion, North Korea has willingly added a new variable to its tightly controlled media landscape: an "all-out" propaganda against once trusted but subsequently disgraced members of the regime.

Comments

[1] A short version of this article was published in the course of the GLOBAL VIEW's print edition in December 2013: Stingeder, Karl H. (2013): North Korea, quo vadis?, in: GLOBAL VIEW. Unabhängiges Magazin der Österreichischen Gesellschaft für Außenpolitik und die Vereinten Nationen (ÖGAVN) und des Außenpolitischen Akademischen Forums für Außenpolitik (AFA), 2/2013, 26-27. Also, published online: <http://afa.at/globalview/2013-2.pdf> (last viewed: 08.01.2014).

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