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[Songbun Communism](#)

By [Doug Bandow](#) on 6.19.12 @ 6:08AM

Equal discrimination against all in North Korea's vile caste system.

The Cold War ended more than two decades ago. The Soviet Union disintegrated less than 75 years after its tumultuous birth. China expunged its Maoist experiment in about half that time. Pol Pot's Cambodian utopia didn't last even four years.

However, the so-called Democratic People's Republic of Korea lives on, 64 years after its creation under the protective arms of the Soviet Red Army. The DPRK has fused communism with monarchy, twice elevating to godlike status a son of the previous dictator. North Korea's obituary has oft been written, but the Kim dynasty staggers on, seemingly unaffected by mass starvation, pervasive poverty, extraordinary repression, and social collapse.

It is hard to imagine a starker comparison than between the North and the Republic of Korea, a prosperous and democratic state. Yet even more dramatic may be the contrast between what the DPRK is and what it was supposed to be.

North Korean founder Kim Il-sung was an anti-Japanese guerrilla. Give him his due: he fought against a system of foreign repression. Japan had turned the once independent kingdom into a colony. Tokyo's brutal suppression of Koreans' identity rankles still, poisoning the relationship between two modern nations that should be cooperating to promote a democratic, market-oriented order in East Asia.

Kim succeeded, though only because the U.S., aided by Great Britain, Australia, and other allied states, defeated Japan in World War II. Kim ended up in charge of his own state because the Soviet Union needed a pliable front man when tasked with occupying the northern half of the Korean Peninsula. He was left in power when Moscow withdrew its troops and created an independent communist state to match the ROK, established with American support in the south.

Kim theoretically fought to overthrow oppressors who had put their own interests before that of the Korean people. The Japanese-imposed order had elevated to positions of influence and wealth those willing to serve Tokyo. Kim pulled them all down.

And replaced them with representatives of a new, even more arbitrary and harsh system.

A land of equality the DPRK did not become. Rather, Kim established songbun, a system of social classification that places people in political castes almost as permanent as the infamous Indian birth categories ranging from untouchable to Brahmin. The result was permanent privilege for Kim and his allies and permanent privation for many others. Robert Collins, a former Defense Department employee who has lived in South Korea, [explores the vagaries of this awful system](#) in "Marked for Life: Songbun North Korea's Social Classification System," recently released by the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea.

There may be no more awe-inspiring system of totalitarianism on earth today than that in the DPRK. Eritrea and some of the Central Asian republics aspire to such status but fall short. Burma at its worst remained largely a military dictatorship. One has to look back to Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union, Mao Zedong's China, Enver Hoxha's Albania, and Pol Pot's Cambodia for equivalents, and all of those have been gone for years, even decades.

Andrew Natsios, a former director of the U.S. Agency for International Development, introduces the Collins report, noting that "North Korean totalitarianism is maintained through several powerful means of social control, the most elaborate and intrusive of which is the songbun classification system." There are an incredible 51 different categories of loyalty into which North Koreans are divided. They are ranked, explains Natsios, in terms of "trustworthiness and loyalty to the Kim family and North Korean state."

Only a communist bureaucrat could be expected to make the fine distinctions necessary to sort people into 51 different boxes. All that the rest of us need to know are the three broader groupings, which determine general status: Core, wavering, and hostile. In 1958 Kim Il-sung, who had gradually acquired dictatorial power despite starting a disastrous war just eight years before, estimated that about 25 percent of North Koreans fell into the first category, 55 percent into the second, and 20 percent into the third. Another, oft-cited set of figures is 28 percent, 45 percent, and 27 percent, respectively. Other estimates take the "hostile" class up to 40 percent.

India's caste system is bad, but social prejudice does not automatically mean government disability. Pyongyang's caste system is political. Since government controls every aspect of life, the discrimination becomes pervasive and inescapable. Observes Collins: "Focused on origin of birth, this party-directed 'caste system' is the root cause of discrimination and humanitarian abuses. The grim reality of North Korea is that this system creates a form of slave labor for a third of North Korea's population of 23 million citizens and loyalty-bound servants out of the remainder."

The consequences are deadly. Natsios points out that during the murderous famine of the late 1990s one Western survey figured that 32 percent of North Korean children were free of malnutrition, 62 percent suffered moderate malnutrition, and 16 percent endured severe malnutrition. Those figures roughly correspond to past estimates of the population's songbun ranking, and official rations are known to be based on political status.

Songbun is no ad hoc matter, something determined by happenstance. Collins cites a formal manual on determining people's classification published by the Ministry of Public Security, which begins a file on every citizen at age 17. In the North, songbun is a critical part of communism. Explained the *Workers' Daily* newspaper: "We do not hide our class-consciousness just like we do not hide our party-consciousness. Socialist human rights are not supra-class human rights that grant freedom and rights to hostile elements who oppose socialism and to impure elements who violate the interests of the People." Human rights for me but not thee is the essence of songbun, and North Korean communism.

Virtually all of the refugees interviewed by Collins were aware of the system. Younger people believed it to be of decreasing importance, but their elders -- in their 30s and beyond -- thought otherwise. Explained Collins: "Those who experienced discrimination over a period of time, particularly if that discrimination affects one's education, employment and one's dependents, will be more aware of the harm songbun has caused in their lives."

If the system has waned in recent years, it is because the great famine weakened the North Korean state and government food distribution, encouraging the rise of corruption and bribery. As a result, "burgeoning markets, born of necessity with the state's inability to feed its people, have indeed provided new opportunities and individuals in most categories of songbun have been able to earn some money through their own initiative." The system remains, but catastrophe has made it possible for people to escape some of songbun's effects. Only in North Korea could famine generate a form of equal opportunity!

The system is unlikely to change without a fundamental transformation of the DPRK political system. Poverty and hunger persist, which make it important for the regime to continue to try to maintain control over its people. Indeed, in recent years the late dictator Kim Jong-il cracked down on markets which had developed. The 2009 currency "reform," thought to be a botched policy initiative by some, may have been consciously used to confiscate much of the wealth accumulated by private traders, reportedly sparking unusual public protests.

The regime has even sought to bring songbun into the computer age by digitizing personal information. Indeed, notes Collins, "It is not surprising that the security police labeled the computer data management system designed to make human rights violations more systematic, 'Faithful Servant 2.0.'"

An uncertain power transition further reinforces songbun's importance. Kim Jong-un, or the "Cute Leader" as he is informally known, neither wields his father's power nor rules alone, if he rules at all. He and his colleagues are attempting to traverse uncertain and dangerous terrain, which makes it important that they preserve support from regime loyalists. However, notes Collins: "Changes in the songbun policy would undoubtedly be viewed as a direct threat to North Korea's elite who benefit most from the system." Even if a would-be Gorbachev is hiding in Pyongyang's top leadership today, his room for maneuver is highly constricted.

The basic purpose of songbun is simple, notes Collins: the system "identifies, assesses, categorizes, and politically stratifies each North Korean resident as a political asset or liability to the socialist revolution and the regime in general and to the ruling Kim family specifically." Other governments focus on religion, ethnicity, or race. In the DPRK loyalty to the communist monarchs is what matters.

Songbun combines an analysis of one's origins -- back through grandparents and extending to cousins -- with an assessment of one's behavior. The latter, at least, allow some change based on one's service to the regime.

The "haeksim" or core class is critical to the regime's survival. This 25 percent enjoys all of the privileges available in a bankrupt totalitarian state. Notes Collins: "The core class, with its high political reliability rating, is given priority in every known social welfare and support category, whether employment, education, housing, medical treatment, or food and the provision of life's necessities." No wimpy blather about equal opportunity.

Next is the "dongyo" or wavering class, which incorporates the bulk of the population, 55 percent in Kim Il-sung's estimation. These are people who are not trusted by the regime but, writes Collins, "who can serve the regime well through proper economic and political performance, particularly if they demonstrate loyalty to the party and its leaders." Indoctrination is viewed as a key tool for maintaining this group's utility.

Finally, a fifth of the population falls into the "choktae" or hostile class. These "impure elements" or "anti-party and anti-revolutionary forces" are believed to threaten the regime. As "class enemies" they face discrimination in every aspect of life. Their opportunity to improve their status is extremely limited.

It is not just the idea of such a system that is horrid. Imagine what it does to the spirit of those who can never escape its confines. Writes Collins: "Essentially a rigid caste system, songbun leaves most North Koreans with little-to-no hope for reward for personal initiative and very little room for personal choice."

While a life time of faithful service to the putative gods in Pyongyang might move one up the songbun ladder a bit, the simplest ideological error can result in a

terrifying plunge. And a stumble does not just ruin one's career. It destroys the life of one's extended family. Explains Collins: "Conviction of the political crime - - particularly slander or action against the Kim regime -- will not only cause one's songbun level to fall to rock bottom, but so will that of one's family members up to third-degree relatives, which will last for generations."

Political loyalty is treated as an immutable genetic characteristic. No doubt, one advantage of songbun so interpreted is that it discourages resistance to the regime, since the price of disobedience is so high. But the practice also reflects a bizarrely atavistic notion that political loyalty is born, not made. Class is essentially viewed as part of one's DNA, and can be worked out only over generations.

As such, songbun reflects an underlying paranoia that demonstrates the truth of Lord Acton's famous axiom, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Lots of us have personality quirks and character flaws, but most of us can do only limited harm as a result. Give people absolute political control and the result is horror.

In 1950 Kim Il-sung ordered the invasion of South Korea, triggering a humanitarian catastrophe that killed millions. His attempt to conquer the ROK failed, but he survived the debacle. However, staying in power required ousting, and in many cases executing, communist loyalists who happened to belong to different factions -- friendly to China or the Soviet Union, or from the peninsula's south. The songbun system allowed him to go on and categorize the entire population.

Among Kim's most surprising (and probably surprised) victims were repatriated prisoners-of-war, Kim's literal foot soldiers in his war of conquest. Observers Collins: "Initially the regime manipulated their image, treating them as heroes, but afterwards about 70% were suspected of being spies for the South. Once considered war heroes, these individuals underwent severe scrutiny and were often labeled politically unreliable. People who had emerged as leaders of prisoners in the United Nations Command POW camps were, after they returned to North Korea, often charged with political crimes and executed."

Kim & Co. certainly had an odd way of saying thanks to those who fought on their behalf.

From the outside, the DPRK has a comic opera feel about it. Goofy dictators with bouffant hairdos. Mass choreographed displays with no purpose. Empty skyscrapers amid empty streets. Hysterical vituperation about imagined enemies. Extravagant myth-making about semi-divine rulers.

On the inside, however, the North is no joke. Deadly starvation, extensive labor-camps, and social discrimination are the system's norms. None of this is likely to change until Pyongyang changes. Even if the Kim regime agrees to a dialogue

over human rights, much sought after in the West, nothing substantive is likely to change. For instance, Collins notes that "International criticism of the North Korean penal code has forced apparent improvements in the code; however, North Korea has not altered the political nature of sentencing." Who would have thought?

Songbun is likely to be one of the last practices to disappear from the DPRK. It is the foundation of privilege and power for the North Korean elite. Kim Il-sung gained power in the name of liberation, but created a system of slavery that still endures. Although he is dead -- while still serving as the North's "eternal president" -- the system he created may soon outlast the Soviet Union, the Bolsheviks' bastard political child which birthed so much death and destruction worldwide.



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