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North Korea: There Shall Be No Religion Before the Kims

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Perhaps the most striking visual presence in North Korea is of the Kims, founder Kim Il-sung, the “Great Leader” of Korean War fame, and his son and successor, “Dear Leader” Kim Jong-il. Although nominally a communist country, the North displays no pictures or statues, in public, at least, of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Mao, or any other communist luminaries. Judged on that characteristic alone, you might think you were in the Republic of Korea.

Nor does the ruling party call itself communist. It is the Workers’ Party of Korea. Pyongyang doesn’t even employ the universal hammer and sickle. The North Korean government added a paintbrush to represent intellectuals. And the overarching ideological framework is not Marxism, but Juche, which roughly translates into “self-reliance.”

In the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Juche counts as a Big Idea, a special creation of the Great Leader, who though gone 27 years engaging the afterlife, remains the country’s eternal president. One of Pyongyang’s important landmarks is the Juche Tower, officially the Tower of Juche Thought.

Some 560 feet high, it is taller (naturally!) than the Washington Monument. (The North Korean Arch of Triumph also is bigger than France's older version. The DPRK has so many more victories to celebrate!) The tower is filled with little plaques ostensibly sent by Juche study societies around the world, including some in America. While I was skeptical that the latter existed when I first visited in 1992, today it seems more plausible. The Berkeley Juche Society? The Madison, Wisconsin, Study Group for the Juche Idea? Maybe.

With Kims Il-sung and Jong-il no longer with us, the next generation's Kim Jong-un is in charge. And the family dynasty is more than a traditional monarchy. The first two Kims were ascribed to possess near-divine characteristics — born on a sacred mountain and able to perform superhuman feats. They are said to enjoy otherworldly powers, being omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent. With the care of their people naturally their constant and overriding concern.

Although Kim Jong-un appears to keep his claims more earth-bound, North Koreans still speak of the Supreme Leader in hushed tones, hailing his involvement and guidance regarding most any problem mentioned. Indeed, long derided on Chinese social media as “Fatty Kim,” he recently was said to have shown solidarity with his hard-pressed people by losing weight. Imagine: Fatty Kim-lite, man of the people!

Unsurprisingly, in such a system where politics is everything and the dictator is an absolute and near divine presence, religion is a great threat. It isn't enough to instruct believers to avoid politics. For their faith instructs that there is a transcendent to which politics is subordinate. This means that the Kims are accountable to some standard — and will ultimately be held accountable by someone.

Other totalitarians have recognized the threat posed by Christianity. The notorious Nazi “People's Court” Judge Roland Freisler, who presided over the show trials of many of the July 20, 1944 plotters (and, appropriately, was killed by an Allied bombing raid), once observed:

“*Christianity* and National Socialism have *only* one thing in *common*. They both demand the *whole man*.” Adherents to the Kim dynasty believe the same.

As a result, the North typically ends up at the top of lists of global persecutors of religion. It long has been almost impossible to detail the Kim dynasty’s abuses because the regime is so closed to outsiders. However, as increasing numbers of people have fled and managed to reach South Korea, America, and other locations, they have shed light on Pyongyang’s malign fixation on religion.

Unsurprisingly, the Kims do not react well when citizens flee the regime’s unkind attentions — Kim Jong-un’s sister, Kim Yo-jong, has called defectors “human scum,” among other insults. However, the Kims take special umbrage with wannabe escapees who have contact with Christians. If captured — usually by China, and then returned and found to have consorted with (typically) South Korean believers, punishment is far heavier, sometimes death.

Helping to expose North Korean abuses is [a new report](#) from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom titled “Organized Religion: Documenting Religious Freedom Violations in North Korea.” The tale is awful and depressing, but sadly familiar in a world in which religious liberty is under siege.

USCIRF interviewed victims, victimizers, and witnesses. It found that because of the DPRK’s brutal mistreatment, “Victims suffered distinct human rights violations, including arbitrary arrest and detention; torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment; and the denial of life.”

More importantly, the commission concluded that the abuses were systemic, a natural outgrowth of North Korea’s unique synthesis of monarchy and communism. The report said:

We find that the denial of religious freedom is absolute. Our findings establish that the persecution of individuals exercising their right to religious freedom in North Korea goes

well beyond a government neglecting its duty to respect, protect, and fulfill the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief. It also extends beyond a government persecuting one or more social groups for their religion or belief. Rather, the situation that exists is one where the state enforces the absolute denial of religious belief through the active mobilization of organs of the government.

Today, the DPRK is likely the world's most brutal home to coercive groupthink. There are viciously serious competitors in the totalitarian contest — Eritrea, Turkmenistan, and even China, with “Xi Jinping Thought” increasingly mandated for the Chinese people. Still, North Korea is on to the third generation. Christianity only has God the Son and Father. The North's godhead has the son, father, and grandfather!

This is the starting point of North Korean politics. The USCIRF explained that all freedoms in North Korea “are in fact subordinate to and overruled by a document known as the “Ten Principles for Establishing a Monolithic Leadership System.” This document's purpose is to bring each North Korean individual's thoughts and acts in line with the teachings of Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, and Kim Jong-un. And enforcement is ruthless, “through surveillance of the North Korean leadership and central government and party organs, which in turn command the cadres and provincial organs below them, by means of the Workers' Party of Korea committee system.”

Propaganda and indoctrination of course are used to promote the worship of Kim and discourage other faiths. The process essentially begins at birth and continues into adulthood. The report cited a WPK manual that “uses an example of a woman who had learned and disseminated what are referred to as ‘religious doctrines that bring disease to a person's ability for independent thought’ and ‘religious songs’ that had ‘turned [the woman] into a complete minion of the enemy.’ In the directive, it describes how the woman was given ‘the specific task [by a foreign religious person] of gathering people who had gone mad for superstition, to organize them into an anti-state religious group.’”

The North employs a plethora of enforcement agencies. However, the commission noted: “Within law enforcement, the Ministry of People’s Security and Ministry of State Security are the main entities implicated in religious freedom violations.” The law does not specifically bar religious belief or practice, but believers can be charged with harming the socialist order, promoting foreign influences, and engaging in “superstitious activities.”

Lesser offenses tend to be handled by the Ministry of People’s Security. USCIRF reported that one enforcement system “involves a public prosecution process managed by the Ministry of People’s Security and the Prosecutor’s Office, according to the criminal code. Documented sentences for crimes related to religious beliefs handled by the Ministry of People’s Security and the Prosecutor’s Office, which almost exclusively concern adherents of Shamanism, range from six months in a forced labor camp to over three years in a re-education facility.”

The other process involves the Ministry of State Security, which is the more fearsome oppressor since it “proactively gathers information on potential threats against the political system.” Religion certainly qualifies as one of these threats: “Anything that incites or encourages a break from national ideological unity and the *Ten Principles* is considered a threat to the political system.”

It’s no surprise that the penalties for such offenses are especially harsh. The USCIRF said this system is “a secret prosecution process managed by the Ministry of State Security, with typical sentences ranging from 15 years in a prison camp for an individual found guilty to life sentences in a prison camp for up to three generations of the immediate family of an individual found guilty. The Ministry of State Security exclusively handles cases relating to adherents of Christianity.”

Unfortunately, Christians are much more severely punished than practitioners of other faiths, such as Shamanism. Indeed, North Koreans continue to number among the modern martyrs.

According to the commission's report, Christians have been executed in North Korea. It is noteworthy that details from these incidents come from former security officials, reflecting the level of secrecy with which the state deals with incidents of Christianity that arise domestically.

There obviously are no bourgeois civil libertarian protections for any North Korean citizens, especially religious believers. The Ministry of People's Security at least faces some procedural constraints, but not the Ministry of State Security. The report notes: "Ministry of People's Security officers are seen working in public as law enforcement officials, while Ministry of State Security officers operate in secret, in the manner of an intelligence agency. Yet the lack of transparency surrounding arrest and pre-trial detention by the Ministry of State Security extends beyond the moment of arrest."

Brutal treatment is the norm to intimidate during interrogations, force confessions from those arrested, and punish the guilty, which of course means anyone detained. The UCSIRF says: "We documented multiple instances of torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment being perpetrated by North Korean pre-trial investigation officers and correctional officers against persons suspected of religious adherence. Such treatment included physical beating; positional torture; deprivation of food, water, and sleep; verbal abuse; contaminated and polluted food; body cavity searches and forced nudity; the use of open toilets; hanging torture (also known as 'Pigeon Torture'); and exposure to extreme violence inflicted upon fellow prisoners." Prisoners typically faced multiple forms of torture.

No one stands up for the accused in North Korea. The commission noted: "As for legal representation, criminal defendants cannot themselves engage an attorney, but they may be represented by a state-assigned attorney. In practice, the role of a defense attorney is perceived to be that of defending the state."

Punishment is used to educate — or, more accurately, intimidate. According to the report:

Beyond the courtroom, public trials and public criticism sessions serve as extrajudicial forms of justice and punishment for religious and belief adherents. Public trials may involve public criticism sessions where citizens are forced to witness the punishment of a person for anti-socialist acts, such as Shamanic practice. Public criticism sessions are overseen by provincial level authorities and the individuals who are the focus of these sessions will have been interrogated prior to their public trials. The forced attendance and participation of children in these sessions was documented as common practice by our investigators.

Although Kim Jong-un created some hope for change by appearing more committed to economic reform and interested in diplomacy, talks on denuclearization have stalled. As for human rights, he is no liberal. Threaten his authority and you might end up a target for anti-aircraft guns. Even family members are not safe.

Despite its constant bravado, the regime is a paragon of cowardice, fearing its people. Recently it initiated a crackdown on access to South Korean culture. High school students have been jailed for listening to pop music. But seen as even more dangerous by the authorities is religion. The regime spares no expense in combating faith in anything other than the Kims. The USCIRF concluded: “The effectiveness and scale of this persecution discloses the significant financial, organizational, and human resources that the North Korean government devotes to maintaining the supremacy of its political ideology and the Kim family.

The DPRK is devoted to warring against God. However, like so many despots before him, Kim will lose his bid to make personal politics into a new religion. Christians and members of other faiths continue to look beyond the Kim dynasty, despite decades of brutal persecution. And every religious believer threatens Kim and his brutal minions. Like Roland Freisler, Kim demands the whole person. However, many North Koreans retain faith in something beyond the Kim

godhead. When North Korea's dictatorship is finally swept into history's storied trash bin, religious believers will remain, ready to help rebuild their nation for the future.

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