

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

## North Korea's Plan to Save Itself: Make Kim-Style Socialism Great Again?

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Of all the communist nations, which one supposedly doesn't claim to be communist? Of all these countries, which one obscures the foreigner's ability to see, read, or learn about the giants of the faith? That country is the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

The Soviet Union celebrated Karl Marx and Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, more commonly known as Lenin. After all, without the latter, there wouldn't have been a Bolshevik Revolution. To this day, Vietnamese scholars still study the role of Marx and Lenin. In fact, Mao Zedong believed that Joseph Stalin belonged among the pantheon. Xi Jinping deploys Marx and Lenin when waging war on Western values. Last fall Xi also celebrated the birthday of Friedrich Engels. If China abandoned Marxist-Leninism, the general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party warned, "we would be deprived of our foundation."

Yet North Korea has refused to speak much of Marx, Lenin and Stalin. Ironically, that only now seems to be changing—and just a little so far, apparently out of desperation over the diminishing appeal of the Kim family cult.

The original Communist Party of Korea was founded in 1925 but it was not particularly successful. Three years later it was officially disbanded for factionalism and nationalism by the Comintern, though some members remained active. Kim Il-sung, whose family had fled to China, became interested in communism while in school. He joined the Chinese Communist Party in 1931, after which he was an anti-Japanese guerrilla leader. His military accomplishments were real even though they did not match his later inflated claims. The post-World War II division of Korea and the Soviet appointment of Kim as the top Korean leader gave him the opportunity to rule.

The DPRK was founded in 1948 but almost disappeared after Kim's reckless invasion of South Korea. The People's Republic of China (PRC) had to step in to save Kim's regime and his state as U.S. and allied troops neared the Yalu in late 1950. However, Kim showed little gratitude to his benefactors in succeeding years, steering an independent national course and suppressing factions loyal to both the Soviet Union and PRC.

By the 1970s "Marxism-Leninism was deemphasized in favor of Juche, Kim Il-sung ideology, and Kimilsungism," according to NKNews of NK News. In 1980, a political group named the Workers' Party of Korea rather than the original Communist Party of Korea dropped its reference to Marxist-Leninism in favor of proclaiming that "The Korean Workers' Party struggles to practice Kim Il-sung's ideology."

Roughly three decades later the last mention of communism was dropped from North Korea's constitution. At this point, "the DPRK's cultish leader worship system, known as Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism, became 'the only guiding idea of the Party,'" Benjamin Young wrote in an op-ed published by NK News. The USSR and China created personality cults within communism. Kim's largely existed outside of that traditional ideological framework.

When I first visited the DPRK in 1992 I don't remember any communist signage or pictures. At some point, Marx and Lenin were honored with portraits in Kim Il-sung Square, which is obviously a prestigious location in a country that might as well have been called Kim's World. However, those portraits were removed in 2012. As is the norm in the DPRK, no explanation was offered for their removal. Events simply happen, though one of this magnitude presumably was ordered or at least ratified by Kim Jong-un, whose father, Kim Jong-il, had died a few months earlier.

Now, there is a hint of reversal. In April, "the Kimilsungist-Kimjongilist Youth League, governed by the ruling Workers' Party, was renamed as the Socialist Patriotic Youth League (SPYL) at the 10th congress in Pyongyang," according to the Korea Times. For normal people in normal countries, such a change would seem to make little difference. However, this is North Korea.

In 1996, the group was named the Kim Il-sung Socialist Youth League. In 2016, Kim Jong-il's name was added to it. Only Kim Jong-un could have authorized the swap. He congratulated the group, which emphasized that it would continue to promote "Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism," for the change. He wrote that the swap was "deeply considerate of the fresh requirements of the Korean revolution and development of the youth movement, and the unanimous will and desire of the youth league officials and the youths." The *Korea Times* figured that this was an effort "to tighten ideological discipline amid concerns about younger generations' increasing exposure to outside influences."

Moreover, in June the WPK issued new rules which affirmed that "Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism" remains its "guiding ideology," but that its goal is "to build a communist society where the ideals of the people will be completely realized." The mention of communism was new, another tweak pointing to a slight revival of communist orthodoxy.

Although such factors might seem like counting the number of dancing angels on pinheads, they do matter. Since Kim's revolutionary blood is his only legitimacy—otherwise, why should an otherwise unheralded twenty-seven-year-old be anointed as the North Korean equivalent of the

Sun King—diminishing the role of his father and grandfather in even small ways undermines his legitimacy. He must believe that he gains more by strengthening the regime’s ideological foundation.

Kim clearly is concerned about the corrosive impact of South Korean and Western culture. Thus, concluded Young, “the name change indicates that the regime fears foreign capitalistic influences, mostly South Korean dramas and movies, will corrupt younger generations during COVID-19 lockdowns.”

A systematic ideological fumigation campaign appears to be underway. In May, reported the Korea Herald, Kim wrote to the DPRK’s largest trade union urging it to promote socialism, rather than Kimilsungism or Kimjongilism: “They should bring home to them the truth that the struggle against the anti-socialist and non-socialist practices is a do-or-die battle to defend the working-class purity and lifeline of our style of socialism.”

The attempt to revive socialist thought might be Kim’s best shot, but it remains a longshot. Regurgitating fake accomplishments about the Kims, a couple of long (at least for teens and twenty-somethings) dead old guys obviously isn’t much of an antidote to pervasive national failure. However, claiming the superiority of an ideology that has delivered a lifestyle clearly inferior to that available just a few miles to the south also is a tough sell.

Indeed, in countries where communists try to run the economy like communists, the people quickly tire of ideology. This occurred in 1989 when all the Soviet satellite states were swept away. It also occurred in 1991, when the USSR disappeared. Vietnam has been abandoning the old socialist verities in hopes of increasing economic growth. In Cuba only earlier tepid market reforms helped keep its economy afloat. Recently, spontaneous demonstrations swept that country decrying economic failure and political oppression.

The PRC also demonstrated that Marxism, whatever the variant, is likely to thrive only when it is abandoned in all but name. Zedong’s radical vision of communism almost destroyed his country, leaving his people impoverished, oppressed, and tens of millions of them dead. The result was the uprising known as Tiananmen Square but which was, in fact, far broader in scope. The CCP revived its fortunes only by promoting neo-capitalist development, winning much greater popular approval.

Unfortunately for Kim, North Korea’s situation is even worse, with the dramatic contrast of South Korea’s vibrant society and economy just across the DMZ. Vicious repression might convince the North’s young to be more careful as they sample the world beyond the DPRK’s borders. But ideological education won’t make them more loyal, only more discrete.

Ultimately, the best hope for reform in North Korea is internal change driven by younger generations whose members no longer believe or have a stake in the Kim dynasty. Kim apparently hopes reviving socialism as a guide for North Korea will help. He is likely to end up terribly disappointed.

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