

Forbes

Systematic Tyranny: How the Kim Dynasty Holds the North Korean People In Bondage

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North Korea has made its third generational power transfer. Although Kim Jong-un, or the Cute Leader—officially known as the “Great Successor”—may not really be in charge, the system remains as tyrannical as ever.

The regime rests on several agencies of repression, explains Ken E. Gause, a director at the research group CNA, [in a recent study](#) of how the Kim family and allied elites have been able to exploit the North Korean people for more than six decades. His report, “Coercion, Control, Surveillance, and Punishment: An Examination of the North Korean Police State,” is published by the Committee for [Human Rights](#) in North Korea.

The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea was formally established in 1948. The country has suffered through war, poverty, and famine. However, the regime may have suffered its greatest shock when “Great Leader” Kim Il-sung, who had ruled his country for 46 years, died in 1994. Nevertheless, Kim had prepared well, anointing his son, [Kim Jong-il](#) as his successor 20 years before. The regime continued with “Dear Leader” Kim Jong-il in charge for the next 17 years. Now Kim Jong-un has taken over, at least in name.

How have the Kims survived, even thrived? “One of the reasons for political continuity despite economic deprivation is the total control the regime maintains over society,” explains Gause. Government controls are pervasive and brutal. “Overseeing this apparatus of coercion and repression are a number of internal security—or domestic spying—agencies,” Gause adds. They squabble over jurisdiction while battling “to prove their absolute loyalty to the Supreme Leader.”

The DPRK’s form of totalitarianism is unique. In certain ways North Korea resembles Joseph Stalin’s Soviet Union or Mao Zedong’s People’s Republic of China: There is a blood-soaked dictator, communist ideology, secret police, and ruling political party. However, “it is how these pieces of the totalitarian puzzle fit together that makes North Korea unique and explains how the regime controls society,” notes Gause.

The system evolved along with Kim Il-sung's successful grab for supreme power. It's a fascinating if familiar tale of human cruelty and depravity. But Kim's task was no cakewalk: he asserted control over a society anti-communist in tradition, maintained power after starting a war which he would have lost without Chinese support, destroyed factions allied with the Soviet Union and China, eradicated domestic opponents, and formalized an unnatural monarchical power transfer. His success came at enormous human cost, of course, and several agencies of repression were critical in Kim's various campaigns. Notes Gause: "what began as a purge of the party by 1957 evolved into a campaign to thoroughly exert the regime's control over North Korean society."

Cute Leader Kim Jong-un recognizes the importance of the organs of internal security and, reports Gause, apparently "has spent a great deal of time since becoming heir apparent in 2009 forging ties to key security leaders and overseeing internal security policy, including a severe crackdown on North Korea's border with China in 2011 and 2012." Whether Kim is in charge, merely sits at the table, or is but a figure-head, he represents an entire exploitative class. Repression will remain the primary means of preserving the North's rapacious regime. Observes Gause: "While Kim Jong-un may be more dependent on a collective support network, all initial indications are that he will run the regime in a similar manner."

Policy so far dims hopes that Kim will inaugurate a North Korean version of glasnost and perestroika. Some of the changes that we've seen so far, such as the public introduction of Kim's wife, seem designed more to enhance the impact of Pyongyang's PR than improve the lives of the North Korean people. The unexpected purge of military leaders has not reduced the importance of the military as an institution.

And then there are those internal security agencies.

Americans extol individual liberty and justly worry about the expansion of police powers after 9/11. The North Korean system is almost unimaginable in comparison. The State **Security** Department has existed for years but was not mentioned by the North Korean media until 1987. With some 50,000 employees, the agency "is charged with searching out anti-state criminals—those accused of anti-government and dissident activities, economic crimes, and disloyalty to the political leadership," explains Gause. The SSD maintains a "Special Mission Group" which can move against top party, military, and SSD officials.

In recent years Korean Workers Party oversight of the agency has been headed by Jang Song-taek, the Cute Leader's uncle. On Kim Jong-il's death that position presumably gave Jang power in his own right and not derivative from Kim Jong-un's status as heir apparent. The agency empire includes trading companies, colleges, and even a hospital.

The Ministry of People's Security is essentially the national police force. With roughly 210,000 personnel, writes Gause, "Ministry police officers are the most visible face of the North Korean public security apparatus, routinely conducting checks on travelers to ensure they possess appropriate travel documents; maintaining check points to inspect buses, trucks, and trains; and performing normal police patrols." MPS turns political suspects over to the SSD.

The ministry also maintains the Korean People's Interior Security Force to suppress any domestic unrest or demonstrations. The Political Bureau oversees party members. The Security Department monitors the ministry itself (and reports to the SSD).

Also vital to regime preservation is the Military Security Command, which monitors the Korean People's Army. The MSC "is responsible for internal security within the KPA and actively seeks out elements that are corrupt, disloyal, or present a threat for a coup d'état," notes Gause. The agency also protects the Leader—whether Great, Dear, or Cute—while visiting military installations. The MSC "regularly produces reports on the ideological trends, friendships, and daily activities of general grade officers" and reports to the National Defense Commission, which Kim Jong-il turned into his government's most influential organization.

Important in a very different way are the Neighborhood Watch Units. This system was created once the northern part of the peninsula was freed from Japanese control—and, ironically, was modeled on "Patriot Units" used by the hated Japanese. The NWUs meet regularly and unashamedly spy on members: "They closely watch the behavior and personal relations of inhabitants under their supervision. They are also granted the authority to visit homes at any time, day or night," Gause says. These organizations have no power to arrest, however.

The NWUs instead report problems to the SSD or MPS. Typically there is at least one informant working for each of these agencies in each Unit. Moreover, explains Gause: "the neighborhood association members are mobilized for patriotic duties and other mobilizations. They have to clean up local streets, collect scrap metals and bottles, polish statues and portraits of Kim Il-sung/Kim Jong-il, and attend political meetings." If there is good news, it is that as government authority declined after Kim Il-sung's death, so did the effectiveness of the NWUs. The regime has since attempted to restore their role.

Leaving nothing to chance, the regime relies on a number of other organizations to monitor and indoctrinate its citizens. Anti-Socialism Groups were created combining party, prosecutorial, and security personnel. Observes Gause, "Because they constantly conduct surveillance and investigations in various localities, looking for violations of law and order, they are reviled and feared by ordinary citizens."

The 109 Squads were created to combat the spread of South Korean movies and television programs, conducting border operations to arrest smugglers and confiscate materials. Roughly ten to fifteen other social organizations help control North Korean society. The most important is the Kim Il-sung Socialist Youth League, which “plays the important role of restricting any form of opposition groups or actions among the youths of North Korea,” explains Gause. Other indoctrination and control groups include the General Federation of Trade Unions of North Korea, Union of Agricultural Working People, Union of Democratic Woman, Korean Journalists Union, Korean Democratic Lawyers Association, Korean Bar Association, and Korea Students Committee.

Perhaps the worst punishment imposed by some of the forgoing organizations is promoting the mandatory memorization of propaganda material including, explains Gause, “Kim Il-sung’s and Kim Jong-il’s works, the Ten Principles for the Establishment of the One-Ideology System, Juche ideology and related philosophical issues, documents that praise the morals and majesty of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, and various poems and songs praising the Kims.” Death would be a welcome alternative!

In fact, the penalty for many crimes is imprisonment in labor camps or execution. The multi-faceted security apparatus is responsible for surveillance, arrest, trial, sentencing, and imprisonment/execution of criminals of all sorts. Prosecution of political offenses is taken particularly seriously. The North’s extensive system of prison camps is thought to hold between 150,000 and 200,000 political prisoners alone. Explains Gause: “For political crimes, procedures set out in the Criminal Procedure Act are generally ignored. The North Korean regime is responsible for untold numbers of disappearances. According to defector reports, individuals suspected of political crimes are often taken from their homes by state security officials late at night and sent directly, without trial, to camps for political prisoners.” It is not a system to be challenged by the faint of heart.

It may be months or even years before it is known who really is running the North Korean government. Kim Jong-il’s rushed attempt to transfer authority to his 20-something son may have been too little too late. But the temporary personalities matter less than the permanent system, which will continue to rule. Until North Koreans are able and willing to challenge the North’s organs of social control, the DPRK will remain a land without liberty.