
Political Change in North Korea

Recently a Korean journalist repeatedly asked me whether I would prefer a “radical” or “gradual” economic integration between North and South Korea.¹ I replied that whether they experienced an abrupt process of integration along the lines of Germany or the gradual, consensual integration that both governments profess to desire would largely be a function of North Korea’s internal regime dynamics—my preference was immaterial in this regard.

In a sense this policy analysis is an attempt to provide a more informative answer to that possibly ill-specified question. The nature of the current regime, embodying elements of both communism and Confucian dynasty; its sovereign status with respect to only part of the divided Korean nation; its vulnerability to pressure from larger external powers; and its confrontation with the incipient demands for internal social, political, and economic change driven by its isolation as a socialist island in a capitalist sea generate an unusually broad set of possible transition paths and successor regimes. Such paths range from effective maintenance of the status quo to evolution, probably toward a more conventional form of military authoritarianism, to revolutionary upheaval, in all likelihood implying the North’s collapse and its absorption into the rival Southern state.

The title of this policy analysis is intentionally provocative. North Korea’s present leader, Kim Jong-il, son of the country’s charismatic founding leader Kim Il-sung, is more than 60 years old and reputedly not in the best of health (even discounting a history of South Korean disinformation campaigns on this point). It is possible that he may successfully manage

1. Throughout this policy analysis, for simplicity’s sake, the Republic of Korea will be referred to as South Korea and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea as North Korea.

a transition from ruling to reigning. (Former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright [2003] reports that he communicated interest in “the Thai model” during their October 2000 meeting.) It is possible that he will successfully conclude an unprecedented third generational transfer of power to one or another of his sons, though the lack of public propaganda campaigns to lay the groundwork for such a succession or apparent absence of his sons from high-level policymaking should give pause. The July 2002 initiation of economic reforms—affecting the lives of all North Koreans at the grass-roots level—has raised the stakes politically, and other outcomes—abrupt transition to non-Kim family leadership with or without *juche* (the near-theological ideology of national self-reliance), collapse, or civil war—are possible as well. Associated with these distinct political trajectories are equally diverse paths of economic development, carrying with them profoundly different implications for the future of the North Korean economy and its integration with its neighbors, most importantly South Korea.

The policy analysis begins with some reflections on the nature of political change in general and the now voluminous literature on the “collapse” of the North Korean regime in particular. The question is then posed, whether on the basis of our understanding of the determinants of political change, were those who predicted (and in some cases continue to predict) abrupt political change in North Korea correct to do so, despite the fact that it has not materialized? Put another way, on the basis of our understanding of regime dynamics, were the “collapsists” correct to predict abrupt change (hence the regime’s durability is unusual or unexpected), or is the continuing existence of the Kim family regime in the North actually what one would expect on the basis of formal modeling (i.e., the expectations of collapse were misguided)?

The policy analysis then takes up the issue of what the most likely form of regime change would be, if it were to occur. This gives us the basis to then address the essence of the reporter’s question: What are the likelihoods of “radical” and “gradual” economic integration and what are the welfare implications of these alternative paths?

Abrupt Political Change, or Is North Korea a (Pre) Revolutionary Society?

In discussions of North Korea, the term “collapse” is frequently invoked, though seldom defined.² One can define collapse in multiple ways: in

2. The term “collapse” is often used loosely. Huh (1996), S.C. Kim (1996), and Pollack and Lee (1999) are laudable exceptions. Foster-Carter (1997b) contains a rigorous application to North Korea of multiple-level crises (systemic—economic and rationality—and identity [subjective]—legitimation and motivation) based on the work of Frankfurt School philosopher Jürgen Habermas, well beyond the reach of this study.

terms of a collapse of the economy, a collapse of the political regime, and ultimately the collapse and disappearance of North Korea as a sovereign state. Economists normally don't use the term, and it carries no technical meaning.³ One might define collapse as a process of economic disintegration that reduces the value of output below the level required to sustain a population biologically. On this definition, given the allocative preferences of the Kim Jong-il regime (i.e., its massive expenditures on the military), the aid-dependent North Korean economy "collapsed" sometime during the 1990s, though the regime and the state did not.

Likewise the term "regime," though subject to multiple and imprecise definitions, is a similarly loosely and overused term in discussions of North Korea.⁴ In academic discourse, "regime" typically denotes a set of political norms and principles embodied in a set of formal and informal procedural rules and institutions governing access to and the use of state power, often resting on a particular set of constituencies, classes, or social groups. In this sense, regime normally is not associated with particular incumbents—that is, an electoral defeat for US President George W. Bush in November 2004 and the accession to office of his duly elected opponent in January 2005 would not be considered a "regime change."

This usual distinction between incumbent and regime raises difficult issues in the case of North Korea, which is historically unique in its political culture, fusing totalitarian and dynastic attributes embodied in a deified familial leadership. In their formal model of regime dynamics, Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Jongryn Mo (1997, 25–27) concluded that unless he successfully co-opted the Korean People's Army (KPA), Kim Jong-il could be rendered "little more than a titular leader" or "figurehead" in a military-dominated system. Indeed, it is precisely the possibility of the rise to power of a (possibly reformist) military authoritarian-governing coalition—a North Korean Park Chung-hee or Augusto Pinochet who could make the trains run on time (or in the case of North Korea, simply run at all)—that has animated much of the thinking about post-Kim North Korea (Scalapino 1992a, 1992b, 1995; Ahn 1994a, 1994b; Lho 1999).

This vision is based on a series of unexamined assumptions. Is the maintenance of such a post-*juche* regime conceivable, or rather, is the whole *raison d'être* of the North Korean state so bound up in *juche* ideology that the disappearance of the Kim family regime would be

3. One, and possibly the only, exception is Hirshleifer (1963), who defines economic collapse as "a failure in the mode of functioning of the economic system, in essence, a breakdown in the division of labor . . . so that production [falls] even more than [do] the resources available" (p. 113). The problem with this definition is that it would seem to encompass any major fall in aggregate demand whether or not it was accompanied by increases in mortality or systemic changes.

4. On the first point, see the appendix in Munck (1996) for a compendium of alternate definitions of "regime."

tantamount to the collapse and disappearance of the North Korean state? Or is it possible to have *juche* without the Kims? Is the ideology sufficiently open-ended and amenable to reinterpretation that it could be used to legitimate a post-Kim reformist regime? Does the current “military-first politics” campaign with its emphasis on modernization represent the embryonic start of such a reinterpretation?⁵ How does the existence of South Korea complicate this process of legitimization? What if South Korea sought to promote such a government as an alternative to collapse and absorption along German lines? Or does the extreme degree of politicization of North Korean society preclude any transitional path save revolutionary political change, thereby reducing the likelihood of a stable and permanent successor regime? That is to say, rather than the hoped-for North Korean Park Chung-hee or Augusto Pinochet, would Kim’s successor more likely be a North Korean Alexander Kerensky, Mehdi Barzagan, or Lothar de Maizière—political moderates who were swept away by revolutionary upheaval in Russia, Iran, and East Germany, respectively?

In his 1968 masterpiece, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, Samuel P. Huntington defines revolution as “a rapid, fundamental, and violent domestic change in dominant values and myths of a society, in its political institutions, social structure, leadership, and government activities and policies” produced by the inability of governing institutions to cope with the swift rise in political consciousness of new groups and their precipitate mobilization into politics (Huntington 1968, 264). In complete revolutions, this first upheaval phase is followed by the “creation and institutionalization of a new political order. The successful revolution combines rapid political mobilization and rapid political institutionalization” (Huntington 1968, 266).⁶ Of course, this is not the only definition of revolution. Theda Skocpol (1979) argues that revolutions involve an inevitable strengthening of the state. Under this definition, the possibility of revolution in North Korea, at least in its functioning pre-1990 form, is almost ruled out. Whether there could be a revolutionary reconstitution of the North Korean state from its current degraded form is an open question.

Huntington goes on to distinguish between two types of revolutions—a “Western” revolution in which the collapse of the governing institutions is followed by the mobilization of new groups and the construction

5. Bruce Cumings (1995, 1997) makes the interesting point that unlike Mao Tse-tung, Kim Il-sung did not disparage intellectuals; he in fact gave them symbolic representation in the Korean Workers Party (KWP) emblem. This acceptance of technical competence as a virtue might facilitate a modernizing reinterpretation of *juche*.

6. Charles Tilly (1978) extends this analysis to focus on specific groups contending for state power, their ability to mobilize (broadly defined) resources, and the state’s ability to satisfy or resist these demands. One of the curious features of North Korean society is that due to the prolonged period of extreme militarization of the society, now lasting more than two generations, there are a lot of people in North Korean society with military training and skill, should an insurgent group ever contest power.

of a new political order (along the lines of the French, Russian, Cuban, and Iranian revolutions) and an “Eastern” revolution in which the mobilization of new groups and the creation of alternative, rival institutions ends in the violent overthrow of the incumbent regime, as occurred in the Chinese and Vietnamese revolutions. If North Korea is to experience revolution, it is unlikely to be of the Eastern variety, despite its location.

To this taxonomy one might add one more species, what Barrington Moore Jr. calls “revolutions from above,” two major examples being the Meiji Restoration in Japan and the Turkish revolution of the 1920s (Trimberger 1978). Three conditions are necessary: a perceived foreign military threat, a group of ruling elites with no stake in the status quo organization of economic life, and the spread of an ideology, typically nationalism, that elevates modernization as a value to build national strength and avoid foreign domination. Under such circumstances, some faction of the existing elite moves against the regime in order to preserve national sovereignty. Since the dissenters typically include at least part of the military establishment, there is less of a need to mobilize the masses, since the challengers already at least partly control the coercive machinery.

Moreover, the nationalism of the revolutionaries contains appeals couched in terms of traditional institutions and values, indeed, sometimes depicted as being restorative in nature. At the same time, the existence of a foreign threat discourages a complete military showdown between the incumbents and the challengers. For all these reasons, these “revolutions from above” typically involve less social upheaval and are of a shorter duration than the classic revolutions of Huntington’s analysis. Indeed, one could question whether these are revolutions at all, narrowly defined. But our concern is with political change in North Korea—whether it is revolutionary in the classical sense or not—not revolution per se, so it is worth keeping this model in mind.⁷

So, is North Korea a prerevolutionary society? One can identify political and social characteristics of societies and political regimes susceptible to revolutionary change and the presence or absence of specific precursors to revolutionary situations. In terms of the institutional prerequisites for revolution, North Korea is intriguing precisely because of its mix of communism and Confucianism, together with the ambiguous role of nationalism and by extension South Korea, because of the stresses placed on the society by its anomalous position in the world system, and because of the high level of latent military skills in the population potentially beyond state control.

“Western” revolutions are typically aimed at highly centralized states, especially those largely based on personal patronage, often headed by a

7. And of course there is nothing sacrosanct about these analytical categories—the Ethiopian revolution, for example, appears to have combined aspects of “Eastern,” “Western,” and “top-down” revolutions into one bloody, protracted struggle.

monarch or dominated by a landed aristocracy. As Jack A. Goldstone (1986, 9) writes, “Because the government is bound up with the person of the chief executive, the crumbling of the patronage network combined with even limited popular uprising can bring the collapse of the entire regime.” Political change in such polities may be revolutionary when it combines the breakthrough of the proletariat (Marx), the former landless peasants of the lumpenproletariat (Fanon), or the urban middle class (intellectuals, professionals, and bourgeoisie—Huntington) with the mass mobilization of the peasantry or some non-class-based contending group (Tilly), possibly led by a revolutionary vanguard (Lenin). Absent this combination of forces, political change may occur and generate a variety of outcomes, but revolution is not one of them. Economic modernization and shifting demographics have probably led to a relative decline of rural interests in this equation. Ironically, if Huntington is correct and it really is the urban professional and middle class that counts, then by its very success and emphasis on industrialization, Stalinism created the seeds of its own downfall.

Whether the North Korean middle class or proletariat (lumpen or not) exists in a voiceless premodern state is debatable. Pyongyang accounts for perhaps a quarter of the nonrural population, excluding the military, and the Kim family regime has assiduously catered to the needs of its residents. An additional, though unknown, share of the non-Pyongyang urban population should probably be classified as similarly privileged and presumably lacking in the potential for revolutionary consciousness. The North Koreans have done their own internal assessments of political reliability, and the share deemed reliable is relatively small, on the order of one-quarter of the population, with a core elite of perhaps 200,000, or roughly 1 percent of the population.⁸ Unlike the situation in Eastern Europe, where the educated urban population exhibited little loyalty when it became apparent that the Soviets would not use force to back their satellite regimes, the North Korean elite appears to be relatively coherent—many are either blood relatives or descendents of guerrillas who fought with Kim Il-sung, and they recognize that as a class they would have no real role in a unified Korea (Lankov 2003).

Whether the mobilization of the remaining nonelite urban population would be sufficient to affect revolutionary change is unknowable a priori.⁹ However, the case of Romania, in which ethnic-based civil unrest in the provincial city of Timișoara (the country’s fifth largest, with a population of less than 400,000) sparked the end of the Ceaușescu regime, is a

8. On North Korea’s internal classification system, see Foster-Carter (1994), Hunter (1999), and Armstrong (2002).

9. See Kuran (1989, 1995a, 1995b) on the issues of preference falsification and the unanticipated nature of political revolutions.

reminder that sparks can start prairie fires. That said, the specifically ethnic dimension of the Romanian case is absent in North Korea.

In assessing its revolutionary potential, contemporary North Korea may more closely resemble countries that have experienced “revolution from above.” There is a perceived foreign threat, and it would not be difficult to imagine intraelite dissent over the incumbent regime’s apparent ineptness in dealing with the country’s economic troubles. (North Korea is a kind of Rorschach test for social scientists: Political scientists see clever tactics that have parlayed a hole in the ground into a multibillion dollar aid consortium—the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO); economists see policy barbarism.) Current propaganda that emphasizes “military-first” politics to build a “powerful and prosperous country” out of the “barrel of a gun” oddly echoes the “wealthy nation and a strong army” slogan of Meiji-era Japan. One could imagine this militarized nationalism being used to remove the current leadership in favor of a more technically competent group of nationalist modernizers.

Prior to the collapse of East Germany (which among communist polities might be regarded as *sui generis* due to the issue of national division) and later the Soviet Union, no revolution had ever occurred in a communist polity, as it was thought that the highly institutionalized nature of communist politics played a similar role to modern democratic institutions in absorbing and channeling the political demands of new actors. (Modern democracies seldom, if ever, experience revolution because well-functioning democratic institutions are able to accommodate the political demands of new groups and assimilate them into the existing institutional order before rising aspirations reach the point of revolutionary mobilization.)

In the case of Eastern Europe, rising levels of education and urbanization had created a disaffected, if compliant, population. Yet it took economic stagnation, the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan, political mobilization in Poland, and Mikhail Gorbachev’s loss of nerve to send the dominoes tumbling down. The events of 1989 in a sense ratified the essential correctness of Leonid Brezhnev’s freezing of reform in 1968—rather than reviving the system, the liberalization permitted under Gorbachev simply intensified its contradictions and led to its collapse (Chirot 1996, Przeworski et al. 2000). No utopian dreams were shattered. The populations had long stopped believing the propaganda, if they ever did.

The challenge then was to complete the revolution by reconstituting the state. The problem for Gorbachev’s successors was that having inherited a huge and largely dysfunctional state, there was a need to simultaneously reduce the state’s role in the economy, while at the same time strengthening its ability to act as an effective and efficient arbiter of the rules of the game. Paradoxically, democratic capitalism, with its emphasis on autonomous firms and households, actually requires a strong state to work—strong in the sense that it is capable of resisting the demands of

particularistic interest groups in the name of some broader social interest, not just coercing a compliant populace.

In some cases, largely those nations of Central Europe for whom national identity did not have to be created and for whom the geographical and cultural access to the capitalist democracies was the greatest succeeded; their mirror images—the newly created states of Central Asia—largely did not. Russia itself became the model for what was variously described as “apparatchik capitalism,” “markets without institutions,” and “anarcholiberalism.”

In retrospect, the Eastern European experience suggests that while Leninist regimes are characterized by a high level of political institutionalization, the omnipresent penetration of politics throughout all aspects of social life and the tendency toward centralization in these regimes create revolutionary vulnerabilities. Certainly, communist polities have a revealed susceptibility to the decay that is the first stage of “Western” revolution. The historical results with respect to the rapid creation of new institutions are ambiguous or mixed—in some cases the rapid creation of the institutions of modern democracy completed the revolution (Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary), while in others noncommunist successor regimes (Belarus, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) denied revolution by effectively retaining Soviet institutions. In the case of North Korea, the apparent withering of the Korean Workers Party (KWP) and Kim Jong-il’s increasing identification with (and reliance on?) the military as an institution of governance suggests a degree of decay that could create revolutionary potential. The issue is ultimately whether North Korea is a “strong” or “weak” state.

Revolutionary change cannot be achieved without mass mobilization, and this typically requires some appeal to nationalism or the spur of foreign intervention. In Eastern Europe this was another factor that weighed against the revolution-inhibiting nature of the Leninist regimes; a significant share of the populace always regarded them as an alien Soviet imposition. Ironically, it was communism’s success at creating a literate, urban population that created its problems. Unlike China with its vast reservoirs of politically docile peasants with whom to fill the ranks of the military, the armies of Central Europe were unreliable politically in terms of internal coercion. Once it became apparent that the Soviets would not back their local satellites militarily, the game was up.

In the case of North Korea, the Kim dynasty appears to have much more effectively fused its *juche* ideology with Korean nationalism, so that nationalism would not appear to be a revolutionary motivation though the current appeals to “military-first” ideology, which is portrayed as emanating from *juche* thought, might create the intellectual leeway to get the current regime or its successor off the *juche* hook. Indeed, the regime uses nationalism as a tool to deflect discontent onto hostile foreign forces. However, it is possible that appeals to unrequited

nationalism could undermine an attempt by some future post-Kim strongman to legitimate a non-Kim Il-sungist state: after all, once *juče* is abandoned, why be a third-rate South Korean when you can be the real thing?

And, as the experience of Eastern Europe has shown, legitimacy of postcommunist successor regimes is a key issue in their subsequent success. The reduction of the state's overarching role in the economy requires painful reforms, which can be undertaken only if the government is regarded as legitimate. This then sets up a kind of vicious circle: to be effective the government must be legitimate, but to be legitimate it must be effective (Holmes 1996, Skidelsky 1996).

On the other hand, what might be the result if South Korea actively tried to prop up such a leadership in a bid to avert a North Korean collapse and the associated costs of unification? In theory, several of North Korea's neighbors have the economic wherewithal to do the job. (By Chinese standards, North Korea, with its population of 22 million, is a relatively small province.) Yet it is South Korea's response that is key—whatever its pretensions, *juče* is ultimately a nationalist ideology.

In sum, both the dynastic and Leninist aspects of the North Korea polity appear susceptible to revolutionary change. The role of nationalism would seem to augur against it, but the divided-nation aspect of North Korea's existence would also appear to make it more difficult for a post-*juče* nonrevolutionary leadership to use nationalism to establish political legitimacy.

So it is at least conceivable that North Korea today meets the prerequisites of a prerevolutionary polity. What is the likelihood of revolution? After all, as Nicholas Eberstadt (1998) points out, not every prerevolutionary state produces a revolution; indeed, few do. Does North Korea today exhibit the characteristics or drivers of a prerevolutionary state? The existing literature suggests a number of revolutionary precursors, beyond the institutional features of the polity already discussed. The first is economic distress, though the role of economic factors in creating revolutionary situations is a complex one. Rich and prosperous countries do not typically experience revolutions, nor do grindingly poor countries. (Contrary to much of the commentary on North Korea during the 1990s famine, countries in the midst of famines never produce revolutions, though famines are sometimes a by-product of social disruptions caused by revolutions.) Instead, political instability occurs in modernizing countries that may have experienced a slowdown in growth or deterioration in economic performance following an earlier period of development. Growth produces social dislocation and anomie (often associated with urbanization) and may give rise to deepening inequality and associated tensions. Most important, it contributes to rising expectations. The subsequent inability to meet those expectations creates social frustrations that may manifest themselves in various forms of violence, civil unrest, and, in extreme cases, revolutionary political mobilization.

Whether those rising social tensions are translated into criminality, political instability, or revolution depends importantly on the ability of the incumbent regime to maintain its legitimacy, which in turn involves retaining the allegiance of the elite and the sanctity of and control over the symbolic interpretation of “national myths” (Brinton 1966, Eberstadt 1998). What is at stake is who will establish the psychopolitical context for the interpretation of the objective conditions of material reality. Defection of the elite (or the seizure of interpretive leadership by vanguard revolutionaries) and loss of control over the interpretation of national myths increase the likelihood that the mass interpretation will occur in ways inimical to the interests of the incumbent regime.

In the extreme, mass mobilization occurs. Whether this is translated into revolutionary upheaval depends on the degree of alienation of key social classes: either the proletariat, lumpenproletariat, urban middle class, or some other urban social identity group, together with the peasantry; and the degree of unanimity among the urban and rural insurgents in support of a common cause. Mass mobilization of key groups is a necessary but not sufficient condition for revolution—to achieve revolution there must be an adequate degree of consensus around the revolutionary program. (The real contribution of Lenin was not in promoting communism as a motivating ideology—it is too limiting for that—but rather Leninism as a mechanism for creating new institutions to consolidate political power.) In the absence of sufficient consensus around programmatic goals, widespread political mobilization may generate political instability or change, but it will not be revolutionary change. Likewise, mass mobilization of one group or another in the absence of more general rise in political mobilization can also give rise to nonrevolutionary political change.

A final and necessary manifestation of this process is the inability to use the state’s security forces to put down popular insurrections either due to a disintegration or loss of cohesion of the security institutions or due to the withdrawal of their allegiance from the incumbent regime. This was a key problem for the Soviet client states of Eastern Europe—the national militaries were unreliable for internal purposes. In the case of North Korea, Kim Jong-il assiduously courts the military’s needs, and it appears loyal to the regime. The fundamental problem remains, however. During the 1990s famine, leave was suspended to prevent troops from returning to famine-stricken home villages, and there is at least one documented case of a mutiny or attempted coup in 1995 by significant elements of the VI Corps, which was subsequently reorganized. It is not without cause that one close observer described the commanding general of the Pyongyang Defense Command as “the most monitored individual in the country.” This is simply to say that the political loyalty of the KPA cannot be taken as given, independent of circumstances.

Whether these preconditions are met and revolution occurs is affected

importantly by the quality of the incumbent leadership and their ability to make timely and coherent strategic decisions. Eberstadt (1998) contains interesting case studies of revolutions that did not occur, including in post-Franco Spain and postapartheid South Africa. However, the present North Korean regime does not appear to stack up very well against the examples that Eberstadt cites of political leaderships that managed to successfully avert revolution and instead achieved relatively smooth transitions to constitutional democracies, though in fairness to all concerned it may be difficult to distinguish between system-preserving and system-transforming (or revolution-averting or revolution-facilitating) policy changes in real time.

In the case of Spain, for example, Francisco Franco could not really create a totalitarian regime due to the counterweight of the Catholic Church, and as early as 1959, he began signaling his regime's acceptance of international norms with Spain's accession to membership in various international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, and the European Economic Community. The difference with contemporary North Korea is striking: there is no alternative moral pole (though the existence of democratic and capitalist South Korea may create cognitive dissonance), and North Korea under the Kims has evinced little interest in adhering to international norms across an enormous range of issues, and indeed, might be best thought of as an "alienated state" with no stake in the status quo of international relations (Roy 1998).¹⁰

Similarly, in the case of South Africa, both key institutions within the society and key leaders acted in ways to avert revolutionary upheaval. To cite a few examples: whatever his motivations, the behavior of P.W. Botha upon his accession to the premiership in 1979 did not seem to place an overwhelming weight on the maintenance of his own personal political power or position. The contrast with Kim Jong-il would appear rather stark in this regard. Institutionally, the Dutch Reformed Church repudiated their scriptural basis of apartheid in 1986—eight years before Nelson Mandela's accession to power. No such disavowal of *juche* appears in train. (Indeed, such a disavowal would appear to be impossible, though perhaps its doctrine might be reinterpreted.)

The apartheid-era South African government's primary political adversary in this regard was the African National Congress (ANC), a multiracial

10. A few examples should suffice to establish North Korea's alienation from international norms: its status as the first (and only) country to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, its status as the first (and only) country to be formally censured by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species for repeatedly using diplomatic pouches to smuggle endangered species parts, its state involvement in illegal drug trafficking, and its disinterest in joining the International Labor Organization or adhering to that body's prohibitions on the use of slave labor.

organization that had a long-standing commitment to a nonracial South Africa and a relatively brief history of political violence. Its leader was Nelson Mandela, the closest thing I have ever seen to a secular saint. In contrast, in North Korea there is no ANC and no Mandela. There is no institution capable of constructively channeling mass discontent, and in many respects contemporary North Korea appears more similar to Romania than South Africa (Noland 2000, chapter 9). So while it is possible to point to instances of “averted revolutions” in contemporary history, the resemblance to North Korea today would appear strained.

Indeed, the case of North Korea poses some very basic issues with regard to political transitions. Under what circumstances could the collapse of a communist regime be nonrevolutionary? Communist societies are so thoroughly politicized that the collapse of the political order would seem to imply almost by definition a reordering of almost all aspects of life. Yet some parts of the former Soviet Union (Belarus, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) appear to have jettisoned the ideological commitment to socialism while retaining the Leninist political machinery. And it is possible that in the future, China, Vietnam, Cuba, or North Korea will exhibit nonrevolutionary transitions, if they are not under way already, by “decommunizing” or “depoliticizing” their societies sufficiently to make a relatively smooth transition to postcommunism possible. Or is North Korea more likely to experience abrupt political change?

The (Non) Collapse of North Korea

Numerous observers have predicted the collapse of North Korea since the death of the country’s founding leader Kim Il-sung in July 1994, when the life expectancy of the regime that he founded was calculated in months if not weeks,¹¹ though these commentators had disparate expectations as to what might follow and whether such regime change should be desired or encouraged.¹² The “collapsist” view was widely held in both

11. Indeed, some predictions of collapse preceded the death of Kim Il-sung. British sociologist Aidan Foster-Carter, for example, broke the cardinal rule of economic punditry by predicting both an outcome and a date, writing “Korea will be reunified; certainly by 2000; probably 1995; possibly much sooner” (Foster-Carter 1992, 96) and “Economic contraction at around 5 percent annually must eventually precipitate an explosion and collapse of the economy . . . this will trigger political protest and action, in either or both of two forms—an inter-elite coup, probably military, or grassroots protests. Either way, the North Korean regime will be overthrown. As in Germany, there will then be a strong popular demand for immediate integration. This will be irresistible” (Foster-Carter 1994, 32). See Choi (1998) for a more comprehensive survey of regime dynamics.

12. Foster-Carter, for example, has consistently argued that the risks outweigh the benefits, in this regard reflecting the dominant view among the South Korean public, apparently intimidated by the perceived economic costs of German unification (Foster-Carter

scholarly and official circles and also among the South Korean public. The American analyst Nicholas Eberstadt, for example, wrote, "There is little reason at present to expect a reign by Kim Jong-il to be either stable or long" (Eberstadt 1995, 139).¹³ South Korean scholar and diplomat Kim Kyung-won in an article titled "No Way Out: North Korea's Impending Collapse" wrote, "[T]here is a real possibility that Kim Jong-il may find himself on the way out in the next few years, pushed out by reformists or military hardliners. More likely, if he is forced out it will be by a coalition of different elements united in one thing only: the judgment that Kim Jong-il is incompetent" (K.W. Kim 1996). His assessment was shared by fellow academic Ahn Byung-joon who predicted that the Kim family regime would be "short-lived," probably followed by a reformist military coup or a break-up and disappearance of the North Korean state (Ahn 1994a, 1994b).

The collapsists cited economic deprivation, the apparent suspension of normal political mechanisms (such as KWP Congresses, Central Committee meetings, and Supreme People's Assembly [SPA] meetings), the failure of Kim Jong-il to assume his father's titles of president of state and secretary general of the KWP,¹⁴ the absence of mass rallies, and elite defections, most prominently of former KWP Central Committee member and Chairman of the SPA Hwang Jang-yop, as indicators of a fundamentally dysfunctional polity.¹⁵

The collapsists' judgments were affirmed by a quantitative study by the South Korean government Research Institute for National Unification (RINU) that concluded that North Korea passed a critical limit of "regime crisis" in 1992, and if the regime did not respond to the intensifying crisis, the country would reach a regime change threshold during the 2001–08 period (RINU 1996). Another study by Bueno de Mesquita and Mo (1997), who formally modeled the process of transition by employing repeated game models calibrated to 1996, predicted on the basis of the potential power of each actor, their policy positions, and the

1994, 1997b, 1998a, 1998b). In contrast, Eberstadt (1997), in an article titled "Hastening Korean Reunification," expressed the view that "The cherished vision of a gradual and orderly drawing together of the two Koreas is today nothing more than a fantasy. As time goes on, North Korea will only grow economically poorer and militarily more dangerous. . . the faster that unification takes place, the better."

13. This quote is not atypical: both Eberstadt and Foster-Carter have remained quite consistent in arguing that the system dynamics of North Korea are unsustainable. See Foster-Carter (1997a, 1997b) and Eberstadt (1999).

14. After his father's death, Kim Jong-il eventually assumed the role of secretary general of the KWP. Kim Il-sung was made president in perpetuity.

15. Even before the defection of Hwang, for example, one observer wrote "There is at least the beginning of the transferring of allegiance of the elite of North Korean society away from the regime" (Maxwell 1996, 7).

salience each actor ascribed that issue (embodying, in their words, “a strong track record of predictive accuracy” [Bueno de Mesquita and Mo, p. 27]) and found that “Kim Jong-il’s hold on power is tenuous” (p. 26) and that North Korea was entering “a period of significant political instability” (p. 25). Thought was given to the “warning signs” and the specific mechanisms of regime collapse (Collins 1996, Pollack and Lee 1999).

Such views were not atypical. When 48 multinational analysts were queried in a poll conducted by Lee Young-sun in 1995 about the prospects for Korean unification through a North Korean collapse and its absorption by the South, the modal response (29 percent) was that this would occur in the period 2001–05, with cumulatively 40 percent of the respondents expecting it to transpire by this time and 60 percent expecting it by 2010 (Lee 1995). A similar survey the following year undertaken by the *Joongang Ilbo* (September 22, 1996) found that 16 percent of the analysts expected North Korean collapse within five years (i.e., by 2001), while an additional 28 percent expected it to occur by 2006. Interestingly, 8 percent of the analysts responded that North Korea would collapse by 1998 or 1999, but that if it did make it through this period, it was unlikely to collapse for another 10 years. Only one of the 50 respondents doubted that North Korea would ever collapse. An informal poll of participants at a September 1997 multinational conference reached a similar conclusion: roughly one-third of the participants expected North Korea’s collapse within five years, with the remainder splitting between those expecting the maintenance of a “hard” state and those anticipating significant reform (Noland 1998).¹⁶

Nor were these pessimistic views on North Korea’s prospects limited to academic scribblers. During a US Senate Intelligence Committee hearing in December 1996, Senator John Glenn (D-OH) quoted from a May 6, 1996, report by the Defense Intelligence Agency to the committee: “The likelihood that North Korea will continue to exist in its current state 15 years from now is low-to-moderate. Unless solutions to the North’s economic problems are found, the regime will not be able to survive. It will have to adapt its slide into irrelevance or collapse/implode. This has led many analysts to believe a process of political self-destruction has begun with potential for system collapse within three years” (Deutch 1996).

When asked to comment, Director of Central Intelligence John Deutch responded, “Either [North Korea] is going to . . . invade the South . . . or it will collapse internally, or implode because of incredible economic problems the country faces; or, third, it will over time lead to some peaceful

16. The conference participants were also asked to put probability weights on each of these outcomes. There was little consensus: the maintenance of the status quo was the only outcome that at least one respondent did not discount entirely (i.e., placed a zero probability weight on it).

resolution and reunification with the South.” Deutch’s personal assessment was that this uncertainty would “be resolved in the next two or three years. . . . It is not something that will go on for decades” (Deutch 1996). Even the US Ambassador to Seoul, James T. Laney, described North Korea as experiencing “irreversible economic and political decay” and that US policy was to “manag[e] the collapse of the system built by Kim Il-sung” (Laney 1995).

Senior officials in both the Kim Young-sam and Clinton administrations expected collapse, and the commitment to build two nuclear reactors in North Korea, embodied in the October 1994 Agreed Framework, was discounted on the expectation that North Korea would collapse before their construction was completed and that if completed the project would be managed by the Seoul-based government of a unified peninsula (Maxwell 1996, Green 1997, Oberdorfer 1997, Koh 1998). Even former North Korean officials got into the act when defecting Central Committee member and SPA Chairman Hwang Jang-yop forecast the imminent collapse of the North. Hwang, who seems to have trouble deciding on which side of the fence to sit, subsequently retracted his prediction.

Unsurprisingly, these views of government officials and opinion makers were reflected in the general public. A poll of the South Korean public conducted by the Federation of Korean Industries in May 1996 and summarized in Park (1997) found that nearly one-third of the public expected collapse within five years (i.e., by 2001), while cumulatively two-thirds of the respondents expected collapse within 10 years (i.e., by 2006).

Of course, the expectation of imminent collapse, while common, was not universally held, as demonstrated by the aforementioned survey results. The most prominent dissenting voice in this regard was that of former US Secretary of Defense William J. Perry. In a policy review commissioned by the Clinton administration, Perry wrote that “while logic would suggest that North Korea’s evident problems would ultimately lead to regime change, there is no evidence that change is imminent” (Perry 1999). Analysts taking this contrary position invoked a variety of factors auguring against collapse. First, there is no clear mapping between economic distress and political change, and while the degree of economic distress experienced in North Korea has been great, it is not historically unique, as discussed later. Furthermore, the socialist model did deliver industrialization and development, at least in its initial stages—conventional estimates do not have per capita income in the South surpassing the North until the 1970s. So while North Korea did experience systemic macroeconomic problems at least as far back as 1990, if not earlier, this should be judged in the context of a political-economic system that had some track record of delivering the goods. Presumably this conveyed some legitimacy to the regime. Moreover, the amount of external support that would be necessary to keep North Korea on “survival rations” was (and remains) relatively small (perhaps \$1 billion to \$2 billion

annually) and easily within the scope of its neighbors to provide—each of whom for their own reasons would prefer to forestall collapse (Noland 1997, Michell 1998).

Second, with the possible exception of the KPA, there is a complete absence of institutions capable of channeling mass discontent into effective political action. There is no Solidarity trade union as in Poland or Civic Forum as in Czechoslovakia. Indeed, there are not even alternative poles of moral authority capable of legitimating dissent such as the Roman Catholic church in the uprising against the martial law regime of Wojciech Jaruzelski in Poland or the “People’s Power” revolt against the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines.

Externally, North Korea’s neighbors have not provided sanctuary to anti-Kim political forces. There is no evidence of anti-Kim political organizing among the refugees in the Chinese border region, and there are no marauding guerilla insurgencies on North Korea’s borders. In fact, North Korea’s neighbors might be expected to actively cooperate with North Korean security services to crack down on such activity if it were to develop. Indeed, the absence of antiregime organizing, together with people voluntarily crossing back into North Korea, suggests a more complicated politics of deprivation.

North Korea has a Confucian or corporatist political culture likening the nation to a family led by a stern but loving patriarch (Cumings 1995, 1997). Such a political culture is inherently hierarchical. Some observers have argued that the Kim regime is unique, deriving its legitimacy not from conventional sources (i.e., the ability to deliver freedom and/or prosperity) but rather through political socialization emphasizing ideological devotion of religious intensity. This interpretation of the North Korean polity as a religious society may not be as far-fetched as it might at first appear. North Korea purged the last remaining references to Marxism from its constitution in 1992 (Foster-Carter 1997b) and has elevated the national ideology of *juche* or self-reliance to the status of “a quasi-religious moral system that purports to explain the purpose of life” (Barry 1996, 118). North Korean ideologues have gone beyond simple neo-Confucianism to address issues such as immortality more typically associated with systems of religious belief than political philosophy. In certain respects North Korean propaganda resembles a perverted form of Christianity, perhaps reflecting Kim Il-sung’s upbringing in a Christian household and oddly paralleling some forms of Christianity-imbued corporatism, though nationalism appears to be the adhesive (Cumings 1997, Snyder 1999, Noland 2000).

The ascription of unique philosophical or religious insights to charismatic leaders is nothing new (Cohn 1970). What matters is their effective inculcation. Sociologist Han S. Park argues, “Political socialization in North Korea has consistently been designed to instill in the system of mass beliefs a culture that is often found in a sectarian and fanatic religion . . .

as in the extreme case of a religious cult, support is based on the existence of an unquestioning faith in the belief system" (Park 1998, 224–31).¹⁷ Barry elaborates on this theme, observing, "North Korean society in many outward respects is the functional equivalent of a religion. It is built in concentric circles, from a pope (or even messiah), to disciples or high priests, to various orders and devout laity" (Barry 1996, 118). Perhaps the apposite comparators for the Kims are less V.I. Lenin and Josef Stalin or Mao Tse-tung and Deng Xiaoping than Moses and Joshua or Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, no offense intended to any party. Lest any readers think such comparisons are over the top, recall North Korean propaganda that describes Kim Jong-il "as a contemporary god," "superior to Christ in love, superior to Buddha in benevolence, superior to Confucius in virtue, and superior to Mohammed in justice," and, ultimately, "the savior of mankind."¹⁸

The implication of this line of reasoning is that the "religious" basis of regime legitimacy may buy it a certain margin of tolerance in terms of its apparent inability to deliver material prosperity or political freedom.¹⁹ The problem, of course, is discerning whether this is an accurate depiction of the psyche of the North Korean masses, which, as Timur Kuran reminds us, is effectively impossible. Even Han S. Park, who takes the "spiritualist" argument the furthest, admits, "Whether or not these national aspirations are echoed by personal and individual citizens' aspirations is uncertain" (Park 1998, 225). On the one hand, the Kim regime was preceded by 35 years of Japanese emperor worship that, in turn, was imposed on top of what Park has termed "an age-old despotic culture," so perhaps North Koreans really are true believers (Park 1998, 225).²⁰

17. See also Armstrong (1998) and Oh and Hassig (2000).

18. Once while in North Korea I had the opportunity to converse with my minder under circumstances that would not allow our conversation to be monitored. When he mentioned in passing that Kim Il-sung was God, I granted him that, but asked about Kim Jong-il. "Seventy-five percent God," came the reply.

19. Han S. Park, for instance, writes, "One has to realize that few countries in the history of mankind have collapsed simply because of the deprivation of the basic needs of the people. The linkage is warranted only under two conditions: economic problems bring about a legitimacy crisis for the regime, and the leadership is incapable of silencing voices of dissent. In North Korea, regime legitimacy has little to do with the economic situation" (Park 1998, 224). He goes on to assert that North Korea is unlikely to experience instability generated by feelings of "relative deprivation" due to the "remarkable level of equality in economic life" (Park 1998)—a dubious appraisal of the North Korean economy at the time and surely an even less accurate assessment after the introduction of economic policy changes in 2002, which appear to have had the effect of exacerbating pre-existing trends toward social differentiation (Noland 2003a). Even Park admits, however, that the regime cannot survive if it cannot continue the process of political socialization around the Kim cult and continues to deprive the populace of basic needs and rights, especially to food and life.

20. Bruce Cumings seems to think so in writing, "[F]oreign observers have gone wrong in underestimating this regime in nearly every way possible. Meanwhile, predictions based

Charles Burton, a Canadian diplomat and academic, wrote on the basis of conversations with North Koreans in Beijing that “the North Korean people see their political institutions as legitimate . . . for most North Koreans, even if they have their doubt about Kim Jong-il’s rule and see him as a much weaker leader than his father, they do not believe that their Government is illegitimate. . . . While we might be inclined to wonder about the rituals of state and look askance at *Juche* ideology, as outsiders we should not be dismissive of the official ideology. It has its own logic and coherence and highly sophisticated people in North Korea take it very seriously” (Burton 2003, 3).

On the other hand, South Korean sociologist Jae Jean Suh (1997, 1998), on the basis of numerous defector testimonies, argues that the populace has never bought into the ideology to the degree that some might suppose, that the economic crisis gave rise to increased corruption on the part of government officials that undermined legitimacy, that there is a great gap between propaganda and reality, leading to a devaluation or loss of control over “national myths,” and that the masses exhibit James Scott’s passive noncompliance strategies and occasional overt noncompliance such as posting dissident handbills.²¹ Or, as Aidan Foster-Carter observes, while one can blame deprivation on hostile foreigners, brutal police and corrupt apparatchiks are a different matter—they are the responsibility of the regime (Foster-Carter 1997b).

The attitudes of the North Korean masses probably lie somewhere between the attitudes of elites who have personally benefited from the system and managed to get themselves posted to Beijing and self-selected defectors, who are presumably drawn from the most alienated members of society and may well tell their South Korean interrogators what they think their hosts want to hear.

What emerges from this analysis is a regime that, while it has faced profound political and economic difficulties, internally possesses a monopoly on social organization combined with an astonishing capacity for coercion and that faces an external environment that, at least when it comes to the issue of regime survival, is fundamentally supportive. Despite evident political tensions, North Korea continues to receive more than \$1 billion in foreign aid annually, including from the United States, and despite differences in opinions on this issue within the Bush administration, no foreign government today is committed to a policy of “regime

on the idea that this regime draws deeply from the well of Korean nationalism and political tradition and will therefore have staying power in the post-cold-war world have been correct. . . . How long this will last can be anybody’s guess, but if Korean history is any guide, Kim Jong-il may well hand his baton to another son-king in the next century” (Cumings 1995, 62). While he is undoubtedly correct in the first part of the statement, one hopes that he is wrong with respect to the second.

21. See also Suh and Kim (1994).

change” in North Korea. Yet the Kim Jong-il regime actively portrays its largely self-created difficulties as a product of foreign hostility as a means of deflecting popular discontent. This strategy may be abetted by the “religious” nature of the regime that may convey an additional source of legitimization beyond conventional performance criteria and may have facilitated the transfer of power from Kim Il-sung to Kim Jong-il.²²

Yet the future of the North Korean state remains very much a live issue. In June 2003 the ratings agency Standard and Poor’s issued a report highlighting the ineluctable prospect of a North Korean collapse and its perilous implications for South Korea, identifying the prospective economically devastating costs of unification as a factor pushing down South Korean sovereign bond ratings.

Reviewing this literature, it is curious that given the gravity of the issue under consideration, these assessments were made without the benefit of a theory of regime change nor any empirical modeling of its drivers. In the absence of any real theory linking material deprivation to political change, much of the analysis tends toward a kind of casual economic determinism combined with possibly inappropriate projections of the Eastern European and German experiences onto the Korean milieu. Perhaps this is not surprising: Despite our lack of knowledge about the North Korean economy, in a relative sense we may know (or at least think that we know) much more about the state of the economy than other bases of regime support. To a man with a hammer every problem looks like a nail. But even allowing for this phenomenon, it is striking that no one seems to have attempted to bring to bear formal models of cross-national experiences with political change. Well, better late than never.

22. Han S. Park argues that one aspect of political socialization in North Korea has been “the creation of the charisma of two leaders, not one at a time but rather as an inseparably integrated whole” (Park 1998, 230). But this begs the question—what comes after Kim Jong-il? Kim Il-sung began publicly preparing Kim Jong-il for leadership at least as far back as the early 1970s—20 years before the elder Kim’s eventual death. There are occasional rumors of plans to groom one son or another for leadership, but this does not appear to have progressed far. If a similar dynastic hand-off of power is to occur, it would seem that time is running out to begin promoting the prince.