

COMMENT

North Korea: Socialism in one dynasty

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David Whitehouse asks why three left-wing organizations would pay tribute to North Korea's dictator Kim Jong-il and celebrate his regime as a model of socialism.

RELIABLE INFORMATION about North Korea can be hard to come by. The regime is secretive, and the mainstream media—rather than doing any actual investigative work—typically rely on official U.S. sources that have demonized and lied about the country for decades, since the early years of the Cold War.

Curious readers might therefore have turned to left-wing sources to explain what's going on in North Korea following the death of leader Kim Jong-il late last year and the assumption of power by his son. They would be seeking what they won't find in the establishment press—accounts of how the great powers such as Japan and the U.S. have criminally abused the country, along with an analysis of the nature of North Korea's dynastic dictatorship.

What they would have found at several left websites would have been disappointing, to say the least: statements and articles no different from the ones issued by North Korea's ruling party, praising the leadership of Kim Jong-il and defending the ascension of his unknown 20-something son to a position of unquestioned authority.

It sounds like a satire worthy of *The Onion*. But really, you can't make this stuff up. The Workers World Party (WWP) sent condolences to Kim Jong-il's party on the death of its leader [1]. The Party of Socialism and Liberation (PSL) declared that the elevation of Kim's son, Kim Jong-un, represented a "well-developed succession plan." [2] The Freedom Road Socialist Organization (FRSO-Fight Back) summed up Kim Jong-il's reign as a case of Korea "standing strong." [3]

There wasn't any criticism in these statements or articles. They all conformed to the belief that these organizations have held all along—that North Korea, a country where one man holds dictatorial power and the vast majority of people live in poverty, is a model of socialism to be celebrated by those who struggle for a better world.

Their attitudes toward North Korea tell us a great deal about what socialism means to the WWP, PSL and FRSO. We can be absolutely clear in stating this: The defense of the North Korean regime as socialist is at odds with the genuine socialist tradition, and its commitment, above all, to equality, mass democracy and working class power.

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THERE ARE, after all, clues that North Korea isn't socialist, which people who claim to have read Marx and Engels could have picked up on.

Take the inequality, for example. The weekly bar tab of the "Dear Leader" was reputed to be many

times higher than the average North Korean's yearly income [4]. Even discounting the exaggerations you'd expect from a hostile Western press, no one really disputes that the Kim family spared itself no creature comforts.

Or the succession process itself following Kim Jong-il's death. Supreme power passed to his son, as it had to him from his own father, Kim Il-sung, in 1994. That doesn't seem like the sign of a society where the masses have democratic control over politics and the economy.

The PSL assures us, however, that Kim Jong-un "has been accompanying his father to major official meetings for the past two years." This regimen of training and testing seems far less demanding than what George W. went through to become the second Bush family president.

In fact, North Korea's succession process seems to be almost a mirror of the transfer of power in South Korea's chaebol, the state-favored, family-run industrial conglomerates, like Hyundai, that dominate the economy on the southern part of the Korean Peninsula. Come to think of it, it's not that different from the succession process in the Ford Motor Company.

That's the point. The nepotism of North Korea makes it ordinary—typical of societies, East and West, where economic and political power is concentrated at the top.

But surely, you may be thinking, North Korea and its regime aren't ordinary. Well...yes and no. Here, it is important to separate fact from fiction.

The North Korean regime is highly secretive and militarized, which sets it apart from other governments. But this isn't because its leadership is especially "crazy" or "paranoid," as Western politicians and the media regularly insist.

Korea as a whole, and especially the partitioned North Korea, received especially brutal treatment in the past century, first from Japan and then from the U.S. Racist Japanese colonization gave way after the Second World War to the Korean War of 1950-53, during which the U.S.—which backed a regime in the South against one in the North supported by the former USSR—firebombed every northern population center. Millions died—nothing was left but the chimneys.

But that's not what we learn in the West. When Colin Powell, the former chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and later secretary of state under George W. Bush, threatened to reduce North Korea to a "charcoal briquet" in congressional testimony in the 1990s [5], he might not have realized that the U.S. had done it before. But millions of North Koreans knew. The heavy armament of North Korea seems perfectly rational in this light, as state leaders seek to deter a replay of the earlier nightmare.

Following the Korean War, the U.S. kept the hostilities going with a trade embargo and a credit boycott that have been in force ever since. The U.S. also immediately broke the armistice agreement that ended the war—it barred the introduction of qualitatively new weaponry—by targeting the North with nuclear weapons on a permanent basis. Aerial surveillance became routine, supplemented later by spy satellites. No wonder so many important North Korean facilities are built underground.

In some respects, the international behavior of the Kim family is thus perfectly rational. Unfortunately, PSL, WWP and FRISO use this socialist principle—support for the right of North Korea to be free of imperial interference and domination—to excuse the behavior of the regime domestically, waving aside the charge that it is an oppressive dictatorship.

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IN THEIR statements and articles, PSL, WWP and FRSO rightly seek to judge Kim Jong-il by the institutions he built or presided over.

FRSO, for example, dwells on a system of social services that includes universal health coverage and education, as well as free housing. This record is remarkable for a country of North Korea's limited resources. It is not remarkable, however, for a country where the state controls everything. The state has to provide health care, education and housing, because there are no institutions outside the state—unless you count Kim's Workers Party, which is bound up with the state and permeates all aspects of North Korean life.

This is really what attracts these organizations to Kim's Korea. PSL, WWP and FRSO identify socialism with state control, pure and simple. They don't ask who controls the state. They may "prefer" that workers control the state democratically, but they don't deem workers' power to be an essential feature of socialism.

In this, they depart from the tradition of Marx and Engels that has always insisted that socialism meant "winning the battle for democracy," and that "the emancipation of the working class must be the act of workers themselves."

When it comes down to it, what institutions did Kim really build?

First, he headed the Three Revolutions Teams (TRTs), beginning in the 1970s. The teams were made up of party cadres, heavy with recent university students, who fanned out to factories and farms to dispense wisdom about how to run things. According to Jae Chong Lim's study of the regime, even Workers Party literature noted that the TRTs developed a reputation as "annoying persons" who, much like Kim himself, fancied themselves as experts about everything [6].

The TRTs may have failed in the task of contributing to economic construction, but they succeeded in giving a youthful Kim Jong-il a personal power base in the decades before he took over from his father in the 1990s.

Then, after Kim Il-sung's death in 1994, Kim Jong-il turned his attention to building up the army—bypassing the power structure of the Workers Party that his father had relied on. The party hadn't held a general congress since 1980, and the younger Kim never called one during his years in power.

Journalist Selig Harrison notes in his book *Korean Endgame* that Kim made strategic appointments of army officers in the 1990s to replace the older generation and to establish a core of generals that was personally beholden to him.

At the same time, Kim elevated the status of the army within North Korea with his famous "military first" policy. The WWP, in its condolences to the Workers Party in North Korea, praised the emphasis on the military as a correct move in light of threats by the U.S.—but it neglected to note that the policy was Kim's method of bolstering his own control over the state.

In 1998, a new constitution consecrated the National Defense Commission as the country's overriding authority. Kim took over as chair of the commission, just as he had succeeded his father as the general secretary of the Workers Party a few years before. The identification of the state—and the nation—with the army, already close during the years of Kim Il-sung, became complete and explicit under Kim Jong-il. As Harrison notes, the Workers Party wrote in 1999 that:

"giving priority to the Army is the perfect mode of politics in the present times...a mode of leadership which solves all problems arising in the Revolution. Our revolutionary philosophy is that

the Army is precisely the Party, people, and state."

This is a frank acknowledgment that an entire people is organized according to the most authoritarian model imaginable—the army. It is a monstrous fraud for PSL, WWP and FRSO to call this mode of social organization "socialism."

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THE PSL goes to some lengths to challenge the idea that there is a "so-called cult of personality in North Korea," and it fumes at the claim that the mass displays of mourning following Kim's death were "orchestrated." "This accusation is highly offensive," PSL writes. "It is paternalistic, and ignores traditional mourning rituals deeply rooted in Korean culture."

It's true that Korean rituals—and Koreans in everyday life, for that matter—are emotionally expressive, more so than Chinese or Japanese ones. But it's another thing to say that it was merely "traditional" to gather people by the hundreds of thousands in the freezing cold to mourn the death of state leaders in the shadow of monuments and photos that depict them ten or 100 times life size.

That does seem "orchestrated." And what about the soldiers marching in formation with their weapons in massive columns—didn't they have to practice?

PSL and FRSO object to the suggestion that this "display of grief" was forced or faked, and insist on the genuineness of the mourning—the better to certify the democratic credentials of a regime that looks to everybody else like an autocracy.

FRSO, for example, makes this equation between genuine emotion and genuine democracy explicit by asking, "What is it about Democratic Korea [sic] and its leaders that cause its people, even those far away from the eyes of government authorities, to mourn like this?"

This question can be answered by challenging its premise. Consider the international outpouring of emotion when a member of the British royal family gets married—or killed in a car accident. Those emotions seem genuine, but the rapture with the royals is certainly no sign of democracy. Maybe it's no accident that royal affairs, like those of the Kim family, are surrounded with pageantry, not to mention incessant and repetitive media coverage. The aim is precisely to evoke awe and mass emotion.

You don't have to be culturally Korean to get swept up in this kind of thing. The Englishman Andrew Holloway spent a year in the 1980s employed in North Korea, polishing the English versions of the regime's propaganda. Within a week or two, Korea specialist Bruce Cumings writes in *North Korea: Another Country*, Holloway could barely stand "his daily portion of hagiography, gross exaggeration, unseemly self-importance" etc.:

"But if you repeat something often enough, soon the human mind succumbs: Holloway found to his amazement that"the sight of the old man [Kim Il-sung] on the television was arousing in me something akin"to the thrill he got when a star soccer player"ran onto the pitch at St. James Park."

There's also testimony that Kim Jong-il himself recognized that the melodramatic response to his appearance was the result of state propaganda. His adopted daughter, Li Nam-ok, told a Japanese weekly that "he is not a pretentious person. For example, the famous 'Dear Leader' title. He couldn't stand it and it gave him gooseflesh to hear it. The people around him came up with such a title."

South Korean film director Shin Sang-ok told Selig Harrison a story about seeing a band of musicians:

“jumping up and down and shouting,” “Long live the Dear Comrade Leader.” Kim Jong-il waved at the band members and gestured for them to stop the shouting, but the yelling did not stop.” At this point, Kim Jong-il grabbed Shin’s left hand and remarked, “Mr. Shin, all that is bogus. It’s all just pretense.” ”

If Kim could see through his own propaganda, why can’t PSL, WWP and FRSO?

Lest these testimonies sway us into seeing Kim as a misunderstood—and modest—prisoner of his own system, we should note that Shin witnessed the incident above because Kim had *kidnapped* him and his wife, Choe Eun-hee, a South Korean movie star.

Why? Before he became supreme leader, Kim had hopes of becoming a cultural impresario, as Don Oberdorfer explains in his book *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History*.

Kim recognized that North Korea’s film industry was weak, so he “appropriated” the South’s leading director and actress in 1978, believing he could, in their company, become the center of an artistic circle. Under threat of imprisonment, they produced some film work, but at the first opportunity eight years later, they walked away from a film festival in Vienna to gain their freedom. It’s a sign of Kim’s arrogance that he thought they might do otherwise.

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WHEN FRSO says that “Korea stands strong,” they are referring to the strength of the state. It is the same state that keeps 200,000 political prisoners, according to Amnesty International [7]. It is the same state that shot dead three North Korean citizens who were trying to cross the border into China in late December. According to al-Jazeera:

“Activists say the North has intensified patrols along its border to try to prevent defections in the wake of Kim’s death on December 17. They fear a tougher crackdown during the politically sensitive transition...” “They’re trying to let people know that those trying to flee will be shot dead right away,” [one activist] said, citing sources in the North.”

We should ask the supporters of the North Korean regime whether they will be sending condolences to the families of the men recently murdered at the border. Who we mourn—Kim Jong-il or the victims of North Korea’s border patrol—is a sign of what kind of world we’re fighting for.

Members of the International Socialist Organization, which publishes this website, have organized and struggled alongside those of FRSO, PSL and WWP in many fights where we are all opposed to imperialist war, economic injustice and other outrages caused by capitalism. We will continue to do the same in the future.

But moments like this are an opportunity to remind ourselves that our vision of socialism is very different from these organizations—and that the differences matter.

David Whitehouse, January 12, 2012

P.S.

* <http://socialistworker.org/2012/01/12/socialism-in-one-dynasty>

Footnotes

- [1] http://www.workers.org/2011/world/korea_1229/
- [2] <http://www.pslweb.org/liberationnews/news/north-koreans-mourn-death-of.html>
- [3] <http://www.fightbacknews.org/2011/12/21/korea-stands-strong-kim-jong-il-context>
- [4] <http://www.theatlanticwire.com/business/2011/12/hennessy-isnt-too-too-sad-about-losing-kim-jong-ils-business/46642/>
- [5] http://www.fpif.org/articles/diplomacy_by_dereliction_us_policy_toward_korea_is_in_disarray
- [6] http://books.google.fr/books?id=dY_izSoFGRQC&pg=PA75&lpg=PA75&dq=three+revolutions+team+movement&source=bl&ots=rYhr2RnmVC&sig=K_U4yM2b1AYUx3UILPF7xS_vuGE&hl=en&sa=X&ei=lcoNT922CMqQiALmrIH7Aw&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=three%20revolutions%20team%20movement&f=false
- [7] <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/images-reveal-scale-north-korean-political-prison-camps-2011-05-03>