

A North Korean Spring?

Is revolution similar to the Arab Spring possible in North Korea? The answer from most scholars and intelligence analysts has been “no”—that the Pyongyang regime’s stability in the aftermath of the events in the Middle East and North Africa is an “old question” that was answered in the 1990s when the DPRK (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, North Korea) faced the most critical test of its life, and survived. The collapse of the Soviet Union, the drastic cuts in patron aid from China, and the onset of famine that killed hundreds of thousands all constituted the ultimate test of DPRK stability, and the regime staggered on through it all. Thus, the assumption is that the Arab Spring has little relevance to the DPRK. The scholarly literature tends to support this assessment. Scholars like Georgetown University’s Daniel Byman have argued that Kim Jong-il has effectively “coup-proofed” himself through an elaborate system of patronage, bribery, and draconian rule.¹

This may be true, but the phenomenal events that have taken place in the Middle East and North Africa have shown us two things. First, in spite of all of the reasons for thinking that things won’t change, they could, and quite suddenly. And second, the mere presence of variables that could spell the collapse of an authoritarian regime tells us nothing about when or if that collapse could happen. Among the ruins of collapsed dictatorships in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, experts have picked out causes that have long existed, yet they cannot explain why they led to collapse in 2011 as opposed to years, or even decades, earlier. Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, and Muammar Qaddafi of Libya had each been in power longer than Kim Jong-il in North Korea. Can we simply assume

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Events in the Middle East have shown that things can change . . . and quite suddenly.

that events in the Middle East and North Africa have no bearing on the North Korean regime?

To dismiss the Arab Spring question by saying the 1990s constituted the critical case test of DPRK stability is to answer an old question with an old answer. The 1990s crisis and the situation today should not be viewed as two discrete time periods, but as a continuum—a continuum during which the

Pyongyang regime may have survived, but in its crisis, it set off divisive processes in DPRK politics and society which have taken root and have now been developing for more than 20 years. An exogenous shock like the Arab Spring may have less direct material impact on the DPRK than the crisis of the 1990s, but it comes at a time when North Korean society is a far cry from its monolithic state of more than two decades ago.

Political and social dynamics since the 1990s crisis have been moving in opposite directions, and this gap is only being widened by the leadership transition from Kim Jong-il to his son, Kim Jong-eun. Ironically, we should pay less attention to scholars and experts who dismiss the Arab Spring's relevance, and more attention to Kim Jong-il's actions in the aftermath of the Middle East tumult, which do not look like the actions of a leader confident that his worst days were left behind some 20 years ago. Does Kim appear to fear the Arab Spring? Absolutely. What does this mean for the future of his regime?

A Spring Thaw in Pyongyang?

There are five potential variables that could bring the Arab Spring to North Korea's doorstep: individual socio-economic development, rates of economic growth (rising expectations), demography (youthful population), the contagion effect, or regime type.² Do we see the possibility for change in the DPRK from any of these? Not really. Rather than modernizing and growing, since the 1980s the society has seen little development. Wealth accumulation and economic growth have not been apparent during the past 20 years. There is no development gap in North Korea.³ Traversing the streets of Pyongyang, one is struck by how the city skyline and streets are neatly maintained, which has led many observers to rave about how the North is not as poorly off as everyone thinks. However, a closer look reveals that there has not been any real development in the country since the 1960s. Not just the architecture, but the public phone booths, trolley cars, street lamps, and other fixtures all look more than 40 years old. GDP growth, when it was not contracting in the 1990s, has

trudged along at unimpressive rates. Per capita gross national income, moreover, has been decreasing over the past two decades from \$1,146 in 1990 to as low as \$573 in 1998, ticking back up to \$960 in 2009, which is still a net decrease from two decades earlier.⁴

Other signs of a modernizing, consumer-oriented society are just not present. Life expectancy is 67.4 years, down from 70.2 years in 1990.⁵ One-third of the population is undernourished.⁶ Given this state, the people of North Korea do not entertain notions of demanding a new political leadership that can improve their lifestyles. What French philosopher Baron de Montesquieu once referred to as the “spiral of expectations” is absent in North Korea. Such rising expectations only come with a degree of hope, which is non-existent. Instead, the people are preoccupied with survival, finding their next meal, and staying warm in the depths of winter.

North Korea does have two important variables for the Arab Spring: a relatively young and literate population.⁷ The median age is 32.9 years and literacy rates are near 100 percent.⁸ But the likelihood of a “youthquake” is remote. Contrary to what many may think, the North’s poor economic performance does not translate into widespread idle and unemployed youth susceptible to lashing out at the government. As a communist economy, first of all, there is technically no unemployment rate as everyone works for the state. Of course, given that the state cannot pay workers for months at a time, this population would by any other definition be considered unemployed. But this does not lead to idleness because most workdays are spent devising coping mechanisms to subsist. The average factory worker at a state-owned enterprise might choose not to continue to work at the factory because he is not getting paid, but he will not quit his job. Instead, he will report to work in the morning, punch the time clock, and then bribe the foreman to allow him to spend the day trying to catch fish or forage for scrap metal that he can sell on the black market.

Aside from these coping mechanisms to occupy their time, all young males are gainfully employed for up to 12 years in the military. The DPRK has a military conscription system where service in the army is five to 12 years, service in the navy five to 10, and in the air force three to four years; these are, by a very wide margin, the longest service terms in the entire world.⁹ Thereafter, all are obligated to compulsory part-time service until 40 and must serve in the Worker/Peasant Red Guard until 60.¹⁰ This system is set up ostensibly to keep the military strong, but it also serves the purpose of keeping young men harnessed and off the streets.

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North Korean society is a far cry from its monolithic state more than two decades ago.

Finally, leisure time in North Korean society, to the extent it exists, is largely spent in ideological indoctrination. There is no idle time when one is serving the Dear Leader. After school, for example, students will march with their work units to the square in front of Kim Il-sung's mausoleum to practice performances for the spring festival, or they will be in sessions reading about the greatness of Kim Il-sung thought.

There do not appear to be objective indicators of an impending youthquake in North Korea any time soon.

What about a contagion effect? Can news of what happened in the Middle East and North Africa spread to the DPRK? Could a demonstration effect occur where North Koreans do not necessarily identify with the frustrations of a Tunisian street merchant, but where they simply learn of the fact that popular protest is a mode of expressing needs and effecting change? One of the major priorities of human rights NGOs in North Korea in the aftermath of the Arab Spring was to try to get as much information as possible into the country about the unprecedented events. As a response to the DPRK's 2010 artillery shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in South Korea, the ROK (Republic of Korea, South Korea) military sent nearly three million leaflets into North Korea describing the Arab Spring. Another method entailed flying hot air balloons from islets off the west coast of the peninsula into North Korea. Packages attached to these balloons carried money, food, and newspaper reports about events in the Middle East. If the winds blew in the desired direction, these balloons would land in the North and disseminate information which would burst the bubble of tightly-controlled information the regime seeks to maintain. But these launches are small scale when it comes to educating an entire population; moreover, they put North Koreans at great risk if they are caught with these materials by state authorities. Human rights-based and reform-advocacy radio broadcasting NGOs, such as Radio Free Asia, Radio Free Chosun, and NK Reform Radio, also broadcast news of the events in the Middle East and North Africa into North Korea on a daily basis. But the signals for these broadcasts are often well-jammed by the DPRK authorities, and most North Koreans don't have access to the kinds of radios that can pick them up anyway.

In order for there to be a contagion effect, you need high literacy rates and social media or a somewhat-free press. In North Korea's case, you clearly have the former, but neither of the latter. There is no access to the world wide web from within the country, and the only internet that exists is an intranet that connects to tightly-controlled government websites. There is only one Twitter

and Facebook account in the whole country (set up by the government). All of North Korea's television stations are state-run, with no regional or even inter-Korean Al Jazeera-type networks. There is no foreign travel and domestic travel is severely restricted. And it is safe to say that the average North Korean is oblivious to the plethora of personal media and entertainment devices that have become staples in our lives. When one of the authors, Victor Cha, traveled to Pyongyang in 2007, he was allowed to keep his iPod largely because the airport security personnel did not know what the device was. He assured them it could not be used as a communications device within the country (there is no wireless internet) and had only music and videos on it.

Two interesting recent developments have been the introduction of cell phones into the country and the opening of a new computer lab at the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology (PUST). In late 2002, the North Koreans introduced cell phones for the exclusive use of elites in Pyongyang, but in 2004 banned them after an explosion at the Ryongchon train station looked uncomfortably close to an assassination attempt on Kim Jong-il, whose train had passed through the station hours earlier. In the rubble of the blast, officials found what looked to be evidence of a cell phone-detonated bomb. In 2008, the Egyptian company Orascom won the exclusive \$400 million contract to provide cell phones in North Korea.¹¹ The first year of operation in 2009 started with 70,000 units. There are now about 500,000 in Pyongyang, but this still only represents about 1.8 percent of the population, and the phones do not have the capacity to dial outside of the country.

PUST was opened in October 2010 through the efforts of evangelical Americans and a combination of academic, Christian, and corporate funders in South Korea.¹² The facility features 160 computers for which a select group of university students are being trained. The use of these computers, however, is heavily restricted to these select students whose job is to glean information useful to the state from the internet. By comparison, Tunisia had around 35 percent of its population conversant with the internet.¹³ This level of exposure to outside information in North Korea is miniscule compared with the relevant Arab countries.

North Korea remains the hardest of all authoritarian regimes in the world. Unlike South Korea in the 1980s, which shifted to a soft authoritarian model with a burgeoning middle class that eventually demanded its political freedoms in 1987, the North has resisted all change. Those who visit Pyongyang come out claiming life does not look so bad. People walk freely in the streets without omnipresent military patrols. Society seems very orderly. There are no urban homeless visible. A recent CNN broadcast from Pyongyang showed city dwellers attending a street carnival, eating cotton candy, and texting on their cell phones. These episodic reports, however, mischaracterize a terribly restricted

society with draconian controls on all liberties. North Korea still ranks seven out of seven (the lowest possible score) on Freedom House's "Freedom in the World" index, and it has therefore earned the odious title, "the Worst of the Worst" for its political rights and civil liberties record.¹⁴ It sits last of 167 countries on the Economist Intelligence Unit's (EIU) democracy index.¹⁵ It is in the 0th percentile for the World Bank's Voice and Accountability index, and is ranked 196 out of 196 countries in the Freedom of the Press index.¹⁶

What is astonishing about these rankings is not the absence of movement to a softer form of authoritarianism, necessitated by the need for economic reform, but that the regime has consistently maintained such controls, decade after decade, without letting up whatsoever. This persistence stems not from a lack of understanding that some liberalization is necessary for economic reform, but from the Kim regime's conscious choice to prize political control over anything else. This puts the Kim regime in a class of authoritarianism of its own.

The Missing Diaspora

Creating political change at home often requires outside resources and a vibrant expatriate community with a political agenda to push for change, according to respected scholars of political diasporas.¹⁷ While it is average people on the ground who spark mass movements for political change, it is often exiled elites, who fled the country in search of education and employment opportunities, who support such movements and eventually come back to rebuild and lead their countries.¹⁸ The obvious example from the Arab Spring would be Mohamed ElBaradei, the former director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), who will be running in Egypt's 2012 presidential election. But there is no real dissident exile community for North Korea like we see with Egypt, Iran, and other cases. This is not to say that dissident movements started by North Korean defectors are wholly absent. The Committee for the Democratization of North Korea (CDNK), Fighters for a Free North Korea (FFNK), and the Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights are examples of NGOs devoted to creating political change in the North, but relative to other cases, these movements are small and do not pose a direct threat to the regime.

Defectors from North Korea show anger toward their former prison guards or toward corrupt bureaucrats, but this surprisingly does not aggregate into an anger to expel the Kim leadership. A July 2008 survey of refugees in Seoul, for example, found that 75 percent had no negative sentiment toward Kim Jong-il.¹⁹ A National Geographic documentary, *Inside North Korea*, followed an eye doctor around the country who did cataract surgeries for ailing citizens.²⁰ After thousands of surgeries, upon having their bandages removed, every single patient immediately and

joyously thanked Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il for their renewed eyesight, not the doctor. Even news of Kim Jong-il's stroke elicits empathy rather than anger from a defector: "[I don't know] whether I should reveal my sadness over Kim Jong-il's health . . . He is still our Dear Leader. It is the people who work with him and give him false reports who are bad. When I hear about his on-the-spot guidance and eating humble meals, I believe he cares for the people."²¹

There are several reasons for the lack of a politically active exile community. First, recent migrants out of North Korea are almost all females leaving the country purely for economic reasons. Some 75 percent of recent defectors are from the northern Hamgyong provinces, which is the worst area economically in North Korea. Women therefore leave the country purely as an economic coping mechanism to survive rather than to act out political ambitions against the regime. Furthermore, because they most often leave husbands and children behind who wait for much-needed support, such as food, money, and medicine, these female defectors are unlikely to become political activists and put their families at risk. Prior to the 1990s, the flow of refugees might have been more liable to protest, as it was constituted of male political elites and military officers, who left for ideological reasons or because they were accused of committing state crimes. The numbers of these, however, were fairly small (607 total between 1949 and 1989), compared with the recent wave (nearing 20,000 currently resettled in South Korea).²²

Second, defectors from North Korea have significant enough difficulties adjusting to life outside of the North which preclude the luxury to entertain ideas about promoting political change in their former home country. Life in South Korea, where many of these defectors resettle, is fast-paced and often filled with social challenges, including disadvantages due to a lack of education, physical diminutiveness compared to well-fed southerners, and social discrimination in terms of jobs and marriage. Many northerners are engrossed with meeting these challenges, as well as paying off brokers' charges as high as \$6,000 for their successful escape to a life that is different, undoubtedly free, but challenging nonetheless. For this reason, many northerners still self-identify, according to defector interviews, as North Korean rather than "Korean" or "South Korean" even after living many years in the ROK. They still feel a sense of pride about their former homeland, and though they are fully cognizant of its shortfalls, most said that if they had to do it all over again, they would still be happy to have been born in the North.²³

The Regime's Fear of a "Ceausescu/Qaddafi Moment"

By all of our political science metrics, the DPRK shows no potential to have an Arab Spring. But then why has the regime seemed so worried? Why did it stifle

the inflow of all news regarding events in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria? Why did it amass tanks and troops in urban centers as a precaution against public gatherings? Why did Kim Jong-il issue a personal directive in February 2011 to organize a special mobile riot squad of 100 strong in each provincial office of the Ministry for People's Security? Why did it bolster surveillance of all organizations on university campuses and in residential areas? Why did the government issue a country-wide inventorying of all computers, cell phones, flash drives, and MP3 players among the elite population? Why did it crack down on all public assembly even to the extent of removing dividers in restaurants to prevent unseen gatherings? Why did it threaten to fire artillery on NGO balloons from offshore South Korean islets carrying news of the Arab Spring into North Korea?²⁴

Indeed, there seems to be a significant gap between what theories of revolution tell us and what the gut instincts of the DPRK leader tell him. The regime's actions reflect a sense of vulnerability. For Kim Jong-il, the stark fact is that dictators who held power much longer than him have fallen from power, or have been hanging on by their fingernails. This must have sent a chilling message. The fact that all of the political science indicators for revolution existed but were dormant in the Middle East and North Africa until now must have given Kim little comfort about the absence of any such indicators in his own country. The main lesson of the Arab Spring is that authoritarian regimes, no matter how sturdy they look, are inherently unstable. They maintain control through the silence of people's fears, but they also cultivate deep anger beneath the surface. Once the fear dissipates, the anger boils to the surface and can be sparked by any event akin to a Tunisian police officer slapping the face of a street merchant.

The North Korean leader admitted to Hyundai founder Chung Ju-yung that he had dreams where he is stoned to death in the public square by his people.²⁵ What the Dear Leader feared is his "Ceausescu moment" (which is now likely a "Qaddafi moment"). Condoleezza Rice explains this as the moment when the Romanian dictator went out into the streets to quell protests by declaring all the positive things his rule had done for the people. A quieted crowd, once fearful of the leader, listened. Then after a pause, one elderly woman in the crowd yelled out "liar!" and others joined in the chant, replacing their fear of the dictator with anger against him. Ceausescu was subsequently executed in the streets of Târgoviste, Romania. Kim thus may feel like he is living on borrowed time. A collapsing domino of dictators, many of whom were his and his father's personal friends, have become the larger context in which the ailing Kim tries to hand over power to his young son prematurely, the succession process having been set in motion in early 2009. Blocking information about the Arab Spring and taking precautions to stifle all public assembly thus became paramount.

The North Korean leader must also be paranoid about the Arab Spring because of the changing North Korean society. In the early to mid-1990s, as the famine in North Korea kicked into full gear, the authorities began to turn a blind eye to market activities in the North in order to deal with the dilapidated economy, the collapsing public food distribution system, and the masses of starving North Koreans. In search of food and opportunity, North Koreans began risking life and limb to cross the border with China by the thousands. Aid agencies such as the World Food Programme poured into the North as well. These experiences, among others, fundamentally altered average North Koreans' frame of reference. The things they saw and experienced cannot be erased or reversed. And so, while the regime may be attempting to harden its control from on high, these minimal tastes of freedom experienced by North Koreans make that inherently difficult. There are, in effect, two forces at work here in diametrically-opposed directions: bottom-up marketization and top-down ideological reification.

Societal Changes

After the 2002 economic reforms, which were instituted in response to the previous decade of economic malaise, allowed for some markets to spring up in the North, the society changed permanently. These reforms, which lifted price controls and introduced market mechanisms, were initiated not because of a newfound love for liberalization, but because the public distribution system had broken down; the government was essentially telling citizens to fend for themselves. Even with the government's reinstatement of the ration system and crackdown on market activity, citizens refused to rely solely on the government.

After the 2002 economic reforms, society changed permanently.

According to defectors, the majority of North Korean citizens today still rely on markets for some significant portion of their weekly food, goods, and a wide range of other products. Farmers meet their production quotas and then sell their best produce in the market. Factory workers at the Kaesong Industrial Complex save their desserts (Choco-pies) from the cafeteria lunch and sell them on the black market. A 2008 study by distinguished Korea scholars Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland found that more than two-thirds of defectors admitted that half or more of their income came from private business practices. Greater than 50 percent of former urban residents in the DPRK reported that they purchased as much as 75 percent of their food from the market.²⁶ These numbers were reported, moreover, when the government was in the midst of a crackdown on markets, aiming to reinstitute the Public Distribution System (PDS). These

markets have become a fixture of life in North Korea that is virtually impossible now to uproot.

Markets create entrepreneurship, and entrepreneurship creates an individualist way of thinking alien to the government. This change is slow, and incremental, but it affects a good part of the population and is growing everyday in a quiet but potent way. The change was evident in the way in which people responded to the government's effort to crack down on marketization by instituting a currency redenomination in 2009. This redenomination wiped out

The North Korean population may have lost its fear of the government in 2009.

the hard work of many families, who could exchange only a fraction of their household savings for the new currency. People reacted not with typical obedience out of fear, but with anger and despair. Some committed suicide. Others fought with police who tried to close down their local market.²⁷ Still others defiantly burned the currency in the public square.²⁸ The greatest vulnerability for a regime like North Korea is when a population loses its fear of the government.

Once the fear is gone, all that is left is the anger. That turning point may have been reached in 2009.

Ideological Rigidity

The inescapable dilemma for Pyongyang is that its political institutions cannot adjust to the changing realities in North Korean society. It can take short-term measures to dampen anger. After the botched currency redenomination measure, for example, Pyongyang tried to adjust by raising the ceiling on the amount of old currency that citizens could exchange. The regime also shot the 76-year old Planning and Finance Department director in public as the scapegoat for the policy mistake. But in the longer-term, North Korean political institutions and ideology are growing more rigid, not more flexible, as the leadership prepares for the third dynastic passing of power within the Kim family. Much like Kim Il-sung, North Korea's founding father, passed the throne onto his son and current leader Kim Jong-il, the middle Kim is now preparing to hand the seat of power onto his young and inexperienced son, Kim Jong-eun.

Neojuche revivalism is in many ways the worst possible ideology that the regime could follow in parallel with society's marketization. *Juche*, which is commonly translated as "self-reliance," "independence," or "non-interference," is North Korea's official ideology and, in many ways, its state religion.²⁹ During the early Cold War years, when the North was at its best, *juche* was held up as the justification for its success (though it was, in fact, massive amounts of aid and

trade from China and the Soviet Union). In the early post-Cold War years, the North Korean leadership moved away from *juche* ideology as it put forth more militaristic forms of ideology and experimented with economic reform. In more recent years, with the North's persistent failures and the need to find a new ideology for the post-Kim Jong-il era, there has been a return to early Cold War *juche* orthodoxy—what we call *neojuche* revivalism. The ideology's emphasis on reliving the Cold War glory days through mass mobilization and collectivist thought is, in fact, the complete opposite direction from that in which society is moving. And yet, the government cannot adjust its course because: 1) it needs a new ideology that has a positive vision for a new leader (and the only positive vision the state ever experienced was early Cold War *juche*); and 2) it attributes the past poor performance of the state over the last two decades not to Kim Jong-il, but to the “mistakes” of allowing experimentation with reform that “polluted” the ideology.

Another lesson that Pyongyang learned from the Arab Spring was that this new neoconservative *juche* ideology must be implemented without giving up its nuclear weapons. The example of Libya made clear to North Koreans that Qaddafi's decision to give up his nuclear programs to the United States was an utter mistake: precisely because he no longer had these capabilities, NATO and the United States were at liberty to take military actions against him.³⁰ And he met his end, like Ceausescu, bloody and battered on the streets of the country he had ruled for so many years.

This confluence of forces gives rise to a ticking time bomb or a train wreck in slow motion, whatever metaphor you prefer. A sick dictator is trying to hand power to his son, and pushing an ideology that moves the country backwards, not forwards. Meanwhile, society is incrementally moving in a different direction from North Korea's past, in large part sparked by the economic failures of the government. Rather than economic growth outpacing static political institutions in an unstable, democratizing society, you have a growing gap between a rigidifying ideology and slowly changing society in North Korea.

The gap between a rigidifying ideology and slowly changing DPRK society is growing.

A single event—akin to a botched government measure or a severe nationwide crackdown on markets—could spark a process that would force Kim to live his nightmare. Or a young and inexperienced dictator, taking the throne after the sudden death of his father, could fail spectacularly to cope with this ideology–society gap. Either way, the new regional leaders resulting from power transitions in 2012—in China, South Korea, and

potentially the United States—will be faced with fundamental discontinuities in North Korea before they leave office.

Social Media

Kim's fears about the Arab Spring also presumably derive from an understanding of the role social media played in those countries, and the realization that the recent baby steps by the DPRK into acquiring cell phones and accessing the internet have the potential to puncture the hermetically sealed information bubble around the country. Recent North Korean ventures are modest by comparison with the Middle East states, so there is little chance of a technology-driven contagion effect today. Indeed, the regime sees these technology instruments as enhancing the state's power, not weakening it. But their introduction creates a slippery slope for the regime.

The internet, for example, is like marketization. Once a society is exposed to it even a little, the associated conveniences become a fixture of life very difficult to uproot. North Korea is ironically a country that desperately needs the internet—its citizens are not allowed to travel overseas, and yet the country wants information from the outside world cheaply and without a lot of interaction. Access to the web handsomely meets these needs. In 2003, the DPRK set up its official website *uriminzokkiri.com*, hosted on a server in Shenyang, China and in 2010 the government joined Twitter and Facebook. The government wanted to carefully restrict all use of the web, but then realized that the internet allowed access to information instantaneously, at no cost, without having to send anyone abroad to get it. Moreover, the government realized that greatly restricting international access to its websites undercut the purposes of trying to attract foreign direct investment.

In meeting these needs, the government started walking down the slippery slope, gradually relaxing restrictions. Now, there are 12 web domains and about 1,000 government and non-government users of the internet, albeit greatly censored, in North Korea.³¹ Some users must be fairly sophisticated, given reports about hacking attempts on ROK and U.S. government sites originating from within North Korea. The PUST project is another step down the slippery slope, as it teaches some of Pyongyang's best and brightest youth how to use the internet. While this is limited to only a handful of carefully selected students who are monitored at all times as they download information useful to the state, the basic fact remains that there are youth in North Korea who know how to surf the web and will someday gain access to a South Korean or Chinese computer that is not monitored.

Cell phones have followed a similar trajectory. The purpose of re-introducing these devices was to serve the state. Phones would enable better communication among the elite as well as another means of coordination and control among

security services. Despite the fact that these phones cannot call outside of the country, they do give a broader portion of the population familiarity with phones, texting features, and web access. Moreover, there are an estimated 1,000 phones smuggled in from China on prepaid SIM cards. With these phones, North Koreans near the Chinese border can call within the DPRK, to China, and reportedly as far as Seoul. Again, these are small steps, carefully controlled by the government, and do not come near replicating the use of social media in other parts of the world. But the internet and cell phones are truly a slippery slope for the regime. They quickly become fixtures of life and a new generation of North Koreans will be literate in these technologies.

Unwelcome International Attention

Finally, the North Korean leadership evinces a growing discomfort with the way the fight for freedom in distant Arab states reverberates internationally. Analysts talk about a new wave of democratization and hypothesize whether it will move to Asia. This raises concerns about international recognition of human rights abuses in the DPRK. The concern here is a different version of the contagion effect—not among its own people, but emboldening international society to “do something” about the North Korean state.

As late as 2004, it was fair to say that, outside of the human rights movement, the global community did not acknowledge the plight of the North Korean people. Among the many other causes around which the world organized, North Korea was notably absent. But thanks in large part to efforts by the United States, this is no longer the case. Both Presidents Bush and Obama have succeeded in connecting the cause of the North Korean people with the global U.S. agenda of promoting freedom and human dignity. In particular, Bush was the first U.S. president to appoint a congressionally-mandated special envoy for human rights abuses in North Korea. He also invited the first North Korean defectors into the Oval Office, including Kang Chol-hwan, the gulag survivor and author. The meeting was a private one not listed on the president’s official schedule, but afterwards the decision was made to release one picture of the meeting to the *Associated Press* with a simple caption saying the president welcomes Mr. Kang to the Oval Office. The picture did not spur human rights protests within North Korea because the government did not allow the picture into the country, but it did spread like wildfire around the rest of the world. Obama maintained U.S. focus on this issue under his administration such that in May 2011, the DPRK for the first time allowed a visit by the U.S. human rights envoy, Ambassador Robert King. In short, how the DPRK runs its country is now under the magnifying glass more than ever before. And the Arab Spring only highlights how tenuous an authoritarian regime’s control can be, and how the

breakdown of this control can capture the imagination and support of the free world.

Skeptics might argue that speculation about Kim's paranoia is not borne out by the history of the regime's stability. The fact is, they would argue, there have been no instances of coups or domestic instability in the North over the past 50 years like we have seen in South Korea, for example, with military coups in 1961 and 1979 that overthrew standing governments. The people are too weak and the military and state controls simply too strong for anything untoward to happen to Kim.

Domestic disturbances, however, are not exactly an unknown occurrence in the North. These have taken place within the military, between the military and the citizens, and even against the leadership, particularly in the 1990s after Kim Il-sung's death and during the famine years.³² It is hard to confirm the severity of these incidents because no one inside the country can report on them. It is also impossible to know whether they represent the entirety of dissent within the North, or only the tip of the iceberg. We do not know if the dissent has disappeared or if the government has just gotten better at stifling news of it. It is clear, however, that internal dissent is not unheard of, despite the draconian controls of the DPRK system. It has emerged in the past. It can emerge again.

Tinder without a Spark . . . Yet

Who would be North Korea's Mohamed Bouazizi, the frustrated and humiliated 26 year-old vegetable vendor in Tunisia whose self-immolation set off the Arab Spring? Two possible sources of discontent might be the "selectorate" and the urban poor. The "selectorate" refers to the elite in North Korean society—party members, military officers, and government bureaucrats who have benefited from the regime's rule.³³ Their support is co-opted by the state through the promise of benefits doled out by the leadership. They are the most loyal, ranging in number from 200 to 5,000 according to different estimates. And to retain their loyalty, they are showered with highly coveted employment positions, desirable residences, plentiful and high quality foods, and access to luxury items such as red meat, liquor, and other imported goods. In many cases, elites are even given lavish gifts such as luxury cars, jewelry, electronics—even wives.³⁴ In 2005, after the achievement of the Six-Party joint statement, we heard that Kim Kye-gwan, the DPRK lead negotiator, was given a new Mercedes Benz sedan.

As noted, some scholars claim that Kim Jong-il has "coup-proofed" himself by prioritizing bribing these officials over any broader economic performance metrics for the state. But this loyalty lasts only as long as the regime can continue the handouts, and the government's capacity in this regard is increasingly shrinking. The cumulative effect of years of UN sanctions on luxury goods, the continued

decline in the economy, and the inability of China to forever backstop the regime will take its toll, making the circle of the selectorate smaller and smaller. Favorites will have to be chosen to receive the shrinking handouts, leaving some disaffected. A leadership transition from Kim Jong-il to Kim Jong-eun, moreover, promises even more disaffection in the party and military. The new Kim will have to choose his inner circle as his basis of leadership, which will send ripples throughout the selectorate, giving opportunities to some, but more ominously taking opportunities from others.

A leadership transition promises even more disaffection in the party and military.

Moreover, as *neojuche* ideology puts more strain on the economy, the segment of society that will feel the pain are the urban poor. When the DPRK undertook economic reforms in 2002, lifting price controls, the resulting inflation badly hurt salaried urban populations who suffered increases in their cost of living. While farmers could offset this with the higher prices they enjoyed from the sale of their own produce in the black market, urban workers faced a double whammy—higher prices and delayed salary disbursements from the government. The result is a potentially unhappy population in cities which is literate, educated, and may have more knowledge of the outside world than most others in the country. Moreover, they identify with the system because they once benefited from it, which may give them cause to regain those advantages. And they probably have cell phones.

In sum, the leading causes that seem to have sparked protests across the Arab world are conspicuously absent in the case of North Korea. Socio-economic modernization, spiraling expectations, contagion effects, demographics, and regime-type factors are all either non-existent or are severely hampered by other phenomena unique to the DPRK. The lack of a politically-motivated diaspora community is a similarly discouraging prospect. And yet, Kim Jong-il seems to lack the confidence in his regime that many outside observers and experts hold. The events that have taken place across the Middle East and North Africa over the past year have given us all an important lesson in humility—you simply never know with certainty what is going to happen, or when. And this lesson should be well heeded in the case of North Korea.

While according to the previously mentioned metrics, all looks calm in the hermit kingdom, there are underlying factors that could potentially spell the end for the Kim regime. The combination of tectonic, bottom-up societal shifts counteracted by rigid, top-down repression efforts is creating a tension in the North that could give way someday soon—perhaps when the stroke-stricken DPRK leader falls ill again—creating a political earthquake in the country. And

the forces unleashed by spreading modern technology seem to only exacerbate these ongoing trends.

The lessons of the Arab Spring and their implications for North Korea carry broader lessons about authoritarian governments around the world. Despite the apparent solidity of many of the world's relatively successful authoritarian regimes, there are often tensions simmering below the surface that can be unleashed without prior notice. The increasing interconnectedness of the world makes controlling populations and information more difficult, and this is not a welcome prospect for autocrats. One way or another, it is far from clear that what appears to be the latest wave of democratization has reached its crest. And if it can happen in Yemen, among the world's poorest and least developed societies, it can seemingly happen anywhere—perhaps even North Korea.

Notes

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