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North Korea: Desperate and Dangerous

by Gordon G. Chang | August 2024

North Korea publicly [executed about 30 middle school students](#) for watching South Korean dramas according to a TV Chosun report. The report cited a South Korean government official.

The dramas were stored on USB drives that had been lofted across the Demilitarized Zone into the North by balloons sent by North Korean defector groups operating from the South.

“It is widely known that North Korean authorities strictly control and harshly punish residents based on the three so-called ‘evil’ laws, including the Reactionary Ideology and Culture Rejection Act,” a South Korean Unification Ministry official said to reporters under the condition of anonymity.

The Kim family, which has ruled the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea since its founding, also

prohibits wearing clothing and sporting hairstyles from the other Korea. A white dress at a wedding is banned as are drinking from wine glasses and wearing sunglasses. Words popular in South Korea may not be spoken in the North.¹

In the recent past, teens caught watching South Korean media were sent to labor camps for terms of less than five years. Now, however, they are [receiving sentences of 12 years](#)—or put before firing squads in view of neighbors.²

The brutal punishments and the draconian restrictions suggest the DPRK, as the regime calls itself, is a weak state. “The Kim dynasty is slowly and irreversibly breaking down,” [writes](#) Chung Min Lee of the Washington, D.C.-based Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.³ As the situation has deteriorated internally, the regime

has become more dangerous externally, not only to South Korea and the region but also to countries far away.

Why is watching a South Korean soap opera a capital offense in the North? At the end of the Second World War, the Soviet Union and the United States divided Korea along the 38th parallel into two temporary occupation zones. The United Nations was supposed to conduct national elections, but they were never held and eventually each side established its own client state. Korea, which had been unified for thirteen hundred years, was severed into two.

Both Koreas claimed to be the sole representative of the Korean people, and Kim Il Sung, the leader of the northern half, attempted to unify the country by attacking the South in June 1950. The fighting during the “Great Fatherland Liberation War,” as Pyongyang calls it, lasted until an armistice was inked in July 1953. There has been no treaty formally ending the war.

The North, an armistice signatory, fights the war every day. The Kim family regime, now in its third generation, feels it must do so because it needs an enemy to justify its existence. The regime needs to justify its existence because, by most measures, the DPRK is a failing state.

The reason for failure, most fundamentally, is the totalitarianism developed by Kim Il Sung. Probably no other national leader has exercised such control over others. His overlapping security organizations were efficient, ubiquitous, and ruthless. Each person was assigned to one of fifty-one categories

and given a reliability rating. Lives were carefully scripted and people continually mobilized. Kim ran concentration camps the size of Houston. The regime had, in the words of one analyst, “an astonishing capacity for coercion.”⁴

Kim’s strategy worked well for a couple decades as his regime outpaced the South in economic growth. Yet he could not outrun the inherent limitations of the total-control system he adopted. As had occurred in both the Soviet Union and China, early gains from forced industrialization faded. In the 1970s, the South Korean economy overtook its northern rival.

In comparison to booming South Korea, Kim’s society looked decrepit and spent. He could hold the DPRK together only by keeping it apart from the rest of the world and propagating lies, distortions, and untruths of all sorts, especially about the other Korea.

Kim and successor, his son Kim Jong Il, demanded their subjects sacrifice for the Korean nation, and for the most part they accepted hardship. Today, however, Kim Il Sung’s grandson, current ruler Kim Jong Un, is not as successful in keeping North Koreans obedient. For one thing, people in the North can see that their kin in the other Korea are far better off. Because they believe Kim promises of prosperity are empty, the current Kim has to resort to, among other things, killing teenagers to keep the rest of society in line.

To maintain control, Kim Jong Un beginning last December ramped up the pressure on South Korea. At the Ninth Enlarged Plenum of the Eighth

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Workers' Party Central Committee, [he declared](#) that “the north-south relations have been completely fixed into the relations between two states hostile to each other and the relations between two belligerent states, not the consanguineous or homogenous ones any more.”⁵

Kim continued the hostile talk in January, [calling the South “our principal enemy,”](#) the state “most hostile” to the DPRK.⁶ The 40-year-old supremo also promised the regime would [incorporate the designation into its constitution.](#)⁷ He said this new designation was “historic.”⁸

To drive home the point, Kim ordered the closing of three agencies dedicated to inter-Korean cooperation and promised to destroy Pyongyang’s massive Arch of Reunification, built by his father.⁹ At the same time, the North unleashed an artillery barrage against South Korean positions along the Northern Limit Line, the disputed de facto boundary between the two Koreas in the West Sea.¹⁰

The *Wall Street Journal* in January stated that the moves then opened “a new and perilous chapter as tensions rise between the two countries.”¹¹

It certainly looked that way. “The situation on the Korean Peninsula is more dangerous than it has been at any time since early June 1950,” [wrote Robert Carlin and Siegfried Hecker](#), two noted North Korea experts, in January in an attention-grabbing piece on the 38 North site. “That may sound overly dramatic, but we believe that, like his grandfather in 1950, Kim Jong Un has made a strategic decision to go to war.” Carlin and Hecker

do not believe recent “war preparation themes” in North Korean media are “typical bluster.”¹²

North Korea for decades has been a master of creating the appearance of impending disaster to achieve short-term goals, so is the tension real or just more North Korean-style kabuki, or “Bullying 101,” as Gordon Flake of the Perth USAsia Centre in Australia characterizes it.

There are reasons for the new tone in Pyongyang. Carlin and Hecker attribute Pyongyang’s stark turn to, among other things, Kim’s realization that the U.S. would never normalize relations with Pyongyang. Kim Jong Un, they told us, had put his prestige on the line in responding to overtures from President Donald Trump and suffered from the eventual breakdown in talks with Washington.

“What is crucially important is to understand how central the goal of improving relations with the United States was to all three of the Kims who led the DPRK, and thus, how the North’s completely abandoning that goal has profoundly changed the strategic landscape in and around Korea,” they write. So Carlin and Hecker implicitly blame Washington for the North’s abandonment of hope to improve relations, something that was especially evident after the Hanoi summit between Trump and Kim in February 2019.

Not everyone agrees that Kim is going to war soon. “This is just justification for more appeasement,” Greg Scarlatou, executive director of the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, told me, referring to the Carlin and Hecker piece.

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Scarlatoiu is correct—Carlin and Hecker fail to mention North Korean hostility, duplicity, and belligerence during the negotiations with the Trump administration—but there is no doubt that something is up in Pyongyang. As Thomas Schafer of the Center for Asia Pacific Strategy and a former German ambassador to North Korea [wrote](#), “Recently, there has been an increase in this kind of violent language.”¹³

Why is the regime raising tensions? As an initial matter, conditions in North Korea now are extremely poor. Despite reports of an uptick—the South’s Bank of Korea estimates that the North’s economy expanded 3.1% in 2023, [breaking three years of contraction](#)¹⁴—there are on-the-ground reports of general misery and starvation. “Things are really dire inside North Korea,” David Maxwell of the Center for Asia Pacific Strategy [told CBS Eye on the World](#) in July. Maxwell, who served five tours of duty in South Korea with the U.S. Army, said Kim and his partner in governance, sister Kim Yo Jong, “are faced with tremendous internal stress right now.”¹⁵

Things are so bad, Maxwell reports, that Kim Jong Un has never traveled to the northeastern part of his country. One of the indicators of instability, he notes, “is the inability of the Party to govern all of North Korea.” That means, after more than a decade of Kim’s rule—he succeeded his father, who died in 2011—he has not been able to extend government and Party control to all of the DPRK.¹⁶

“In absolute terms, food insecurity today is comparable to the time of the great famine of the

1990s,” Scarlatoiu wrote to me in July, referring to the time when something on the order of two to three million North Koreans starved to death. “In absolute terms, not as many people are dying, as they have developed coping mechanisms that enable them to survive despite the deeply flawed policies of the Kim regime.”¹⁷

“Now the suffering may not be as bad as the Arduous March of the famine of ‘94 to ‘96, but it’s heading that way because of Kim Jong Un’s deliberate policy decisions,” Maxwell told CBS. Kim has acknowledged the increasingly grave situation. In January, [he admitted](#) that his regime was unable “to provide even basic necessities such as basic foodstuffs, groceries, and consumer goods to the local people.”¹⁸

Kim’s solution, echoing policies of this grandfather, is to take the country in the wrong direction. He is now in the process of centralizing the economy by grabbing authority from local officials, a prominent feature of his newly announced Regional Development 20x10 Policy.¹⁹ Kim, inspecting plans for a local fishery in the eastern coastal city of Sinpho in July, [said](#) progress can be made “only when the state provides all conditions and possibilities for the economic growth in the regional areas in a responsible manner.” He said his personal guidance was necessary.²⁰

Kim can issue diktats, but, as Maxwell says, “the people know a lot more, and of course the existential threat to the regime is not only information but information about South Korea and South Korea itself as the example of what their life

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could be.”²¹ Pyongyang can call the South’s culture a “vicious cancer,”²² but that’s not how North Koreans see it. The regime’s indoctrination of the young is failing, with South Korea TV shows and music remaining extremely popular.²³

Why does the world care about what happens in the walled-off North Korea? Among other things, Kim Jong Un is selling massive quantities of artillery shells and short-range ballistic missiles to Russia for use in Ukraine, his military is working with China and Russia, and he has been launching missiles and rockets at a fast pace. He is selling weapons to Iran’s proxies, especially Hamas. Kim has even made unprovoked, preemptive threats to launch nuclear weapons. Historically, desperate regimes have tried to keep themselves in power by doing desperate things, such as starting wars.

Until Kim can deliver prosperity, there will be a lot more executions in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. And if executions do not work, then maybe Carlin and Hecker will have been prescient all along: Kim Jong Un will go to war. As his father once said to his grandfather, “If we lose, I will destroy the world.”²⁴

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ENDNOTES

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