

The Possibility of a Crisis in North Korea in 2012

Cho Han Bum

Senior Research Fellow, Center for Unification Policy Studies

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Commonalities between the Collapse of Socialism and the Jasmine Revolution

The major commonality between the collapse of socialism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and the recent Jasmine Revolution is that almost no one predicted either event. The communist bloc possessed a formidable research force and had performed many long-term studies, but these all tended to cling to the belief that socialist systems would remain unchanged and thus failed to anticipate the collapse that began in the late 1980s. Most Middle East experts believed that the unique nature of Islamic states excluded the possibility of a Jasmine Revolution. These erroneous results were based on narrow-minded views of system durability in the former socialist states and the Middle East. There was a tendency to equate system durability with strong diplomatic and security capabilities and ruling regime stability, but this ignored the element of “ruptures within society” which is a core factor in inducing regime change.

In the final period, the Soviet Union and Eastern European states experienced prolonged economic and technological stagnation and their people were forced ever deeper into poverty. Longing for the material wealth of

the Western world, the people of the socialist bloc came to accept the reality of their side's defeat in the global system rivalry and the failure of the planned economy system. The people's loss of faith in socialism was an unseen but fundamental threat to the system. When the people have no hope for their system, the smallest event can ignite a dramatic systemic change. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the regime changes in Romania and Hungary were prompted by small, spontaneous events. This can also be confirmed by the response of the people, who had already accepted the collapse of socialism as an inevitable conclusion. In the minds of the people, the socialist system had already lost its authority long ago. However, many Western scholars focused on superficial political and security factors such as military might and system stability, and failed to apprehend the "societal ruptures" that ultimately led to system collapse in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

Much of the discourse on the Middle East focused on the religious features of Islam and the geopolitical context and thus failed to diagnose the possibility of the Jasmine Revolution. Most of the states that have successfully completed or are in the midst of Jasmine Revolutions were dictatorships that had long been plagued by high inflation, high unemployment, and widespread corruption. Living under entrenched dictatorship systems characterized by endemic corruption among the privileged classes, an extreme gap between rich and poor, and chronically high unemployment, the people had lost all hope for the future. The original catalyst for the Jasmine Revolution was the self-immolation of a young street vendor who felt his right to make a living had been violated; this act appealed to public sympathy more than anything else, and spawned a movement that rapidly spread throughout the entire Middle East. This situation can be explained by the fact that, in the countries where the Jasmine Revolution spread, the people's faith in the existing system had long ago been revoked. Though the systems appeared stable on the outside, internal fractures within the societies had already grown severe. Most previous analysis focused on the religious features of Islam, the stability of the Middle Eastern power structures, and the political context of the region, while overlooking the internal fractures that were occurring within those societies.

Trends in Analysis of North Korean System Stability

Much of the analysis of North Korean system stability in the wake of Kim Jong Il's death has followed a similar context. The focus has been on the new power structure and the question of whether the Kim Jong Eun regime can become firmly established, and most analysis has concentrated on those areas. There is also a

tendency to consider the firm establishment of the Kim Jong Eun regime and North Korean system stability as one and the same thing. The fact that North Korea has maintained its system of one-man rule for such a long time implies that the power transfer to Kim Jong Eun is essential to ensuring regime stability in North Korea. Thus many assess that, since there does not appear to be much of a situational change resulting from the shock of Kim Jong Il's death, the odds of a dramatic regime change are not high, at least in the short term.

When Kim Il Sung died, contrary to expectations, news of the death did not cause a great shock to the North Korean system, nor did it have much impact on the regime's staying power or stability. This was related to the fact that the power transfer to Kim Jong Il had already been effectively completed as part of a long-term succession plan. Kim Il Sung's death helped Kim Jong Il to take power and stabilize his regime, providing the benefit of "mourning politics" and "rule by the deceased's injunctions."

Kim Jong Il's death can also be analyzed along the same lines. Since Kim Jong Il's death occurred at a point in time when the power succession to Kim Jong Eun had already been formalized, no power vacuum was created. The difference is that Kim Jong Il underwent a decades-long process of studying while emerging gradually as the successor, whereas Kim Jong Eun only completed a brief, accelerated succession process. This is directly connected to the stability of the successor regime; in both instances the succession proceeded with the full support of father as the "definitive backer" of the successor regime. Since North Koreans are accustomed to a dynastic power structure it would be difficult for anyone outside of the Kim Il Sung family line to seize power. Thus the general assessment of most analysts is that, at least in the short term, Kim Jong Eun's existence provides a way of safely filling the void in the power structure left by Kim Jong Il.

Internal Fractures within North Korean Society

When analysis of North Korean system stability focuses on the "fractures within society" element, it opens up other dimensions for discussion. North Korea had already been struggling with economic stagnation for a long time before Kim Jong Il died. The hundreds of thousands (perhaps millions) of people who have perished from hunger stand as symbolic testimony to the severity of North Korea's economic crisis. North Korea's long-term economic growth rate is at a standstill, and its future outlook is bleak since it has effectively lost its capacity for self-restoration. Amid this economic crisis, a political and economic upper class has formed, the

gap between rich and poor has expanded, and there has been increasing discord between the classes. Along with increasing corruption and injustice, bribery has become widespread in connection with economic activities for the sake of making a living. The prolonged economic crisis has seriously damaged the authority of the state, and the daily threat of starvation means that the North Korean people are constantly at risk of losing everything.

In this regard we must pay close attention to the aftershocks of the failed currency reform. This reform measure, which lacked a plan for expanding supply, was doomed to fail from the start, and it had aftereffects that the North Korean authorities never anticipated. The swift purging of KWP Planning and Finance Director Pak Nam Gi, who had been in charge of planning the currency reform, testified to the seriousness of the situation. With the state distribution system collapsed, the markets were the only means by which the people could make a living. The danger of the currency reform was that, by suddenly and forcefully intruding into the markets, the North Korean authorities frustrated the people and left them with a fundamental skepticism about their system. According to James C. Davis, social change is more probable in situations where hopes have been frustrated than in situations of absolute poverty and distress; based on this theory, it would seem that North Korea is ripe for a serious crisis in the wake of the failed currency reform. The authorities' forceful intervention into the markets, which the people had turned to for survival after the official economy collapsed, may have deepened the collective sense of frustration, and this could be a major factor in stimulating future change in North Korean society. Therefore, unlike before, this time in the wake of the leader's death there is a high possibility of the public directly expressing dissatisfaction with the system and the leadership.

The relaxation of social controls in North Korea brought on by economic distress, as shown by the rise in defections and the increasingly common practice of crossing the border to make a living, has already become a serious problem. Defections have sharply increased since 2000, with over 2000 new defectors every year since 2006. Defection methods have also grown more diverse, crossing both land and sea and sometimes happening by plan, and many believe that the number of defectors who have safely crossed into South Korea does not even compare with the number still living in uncertain conditions overseas. While it is difficult to make a precise estimate, a report by the US Congressional-Executive Commission on China estimated that at present (2011) there are at most 100,000 orphaned defector children inside China, which gives an impression of the massive numbers of defectors residing in other countries, principally China. Defections may have

slowed due to the recent crackdown, but as long as the crisis situation continues inside North Korea this must be considered merely a temporary lull. As families are broken up by the food crisis, defections will continue to increase, reflecting the fundamental crisis in North Korean society.

We should also take note of the absence of any ideological center that could act as a focal point for social cohesion. Despite the lengthy process of setting up his succession and building his power base, Kim Jong Il still ruled in the name of Kim Il Sung's legacy and depended on his political authority. This was done to make maximum use of the people's memories of the system formation and early economic construction processes that took place under Kim Il Sung's leadership. The problem is that in Kim Jong Eun's case, his father Kim Jong Il left no such useful legacy for his son. During the period in which Kim Jong Il cemented his grip on power, North Korea experienced its greatest systemic crisis and large-scale starvation, known as the "Arduous March," and the people saw no sign of the promised "strong and prosperous nation." In light of this, it seems impossible that the same "charisma-based institutionalization" could be successfully transmitted from Kim Jong Il to Kim Jong Eun. The system criticism that began under Kim Jong Il is likely to grow more serious under Kim Jong Eun.

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Prospects for a Crisis in 2012

2012 could potentially be a very dangerous year for North Korea, as it anticipates several large-scale domestic political events such as the centenary of Kim Il Sung's birth and the pronouncement of the strong and prosperous nation. Regardless of

the stability of the Kim Jong Eun system, if the regime is unable to execute an adequate strategy for dealing with internal social fractures, the North Korean crisis could develop into a whole new dimension in 2012. The North Korean authorities had promoted the politically symbolic year of 2012 as a “year of hope” for the people as they suffered through a prolonged period of economic distress and poverty, urging patience and cooperation. This has given the people fresh hope but also carries the possibility of explosive resistance in the event that that hope is frustrated. For the sake of the planned domestic political events, North Korea needs to show its people some conspicuous signs of progress, such as restoration of the public distribution system and tangible signs of economic recovery. However, the regime is having difficulty acquiring the resources needed to make these things happen. Factors like the reduction of aid from the international community due to the nuclear issue and the termination of inter-Korean trade after the military provocations against South Korea have made it difficult for North Korea to acquire the resources it needs for regime survival. Considering all of this, 2012 could be a crisis year for North Korea. The North Korean public has been compelled to be patient, and if their situation does not improve in the “promised year of 2012,” disaffected public sentiment could act as an explosive catalyst for change.

As the North Korean economy has lost its capacity for self-restoration, the key to easing the economic crisis is South Korea. Resuming South Korean aid and enlivening inter-Korean economic cooperation are vital tasks for North Korea. In its current state of international isolation North Korea needs adequate support from China for its survival. But since the stability of Chinese aid is unclear, in order to ease the economic crisis North Korea will need expanded inter-Korean cooperation capable of creating steady sources of income like the Kaesong Industrial Complex and Mt. Kumgang tourism. Particularly since North Korea needs to establish a festive atmosphere for the 2012 events and ease the food crisis, acquiring resources through improved relations with South Korea is an urgent task. But the military holds the key to the stable succession of Kim Jong Eun, so there is little chance that North Korea will risk alienating the military by offering a solution to the Cheonan/Yeonpyeong issue. Under the Kim Jong Eun regime, which has a weaker power base than the Kim Jong Il regime had, the positions of the military and hard-line anti-South factions will be stronger than before, and Kim Jong Eun’s ability to keep these groups in check will be limited. Therefore there is little real probability of the Kim Jong Eun regime stepping up efforts to improve inter-Korean relations in order to break out of its economic crisis in 2012.

The odds of North Korea's economic situation easing significantly in 2012 are also low. There is always the possibility of public disturbances breaking out over food shortages, and the rise of the hard-line faction could bring about serious bloodshed. If the situation worsens, Kim Jong Eun could be offered up as some sort of sacrificial lamb by his backers, who are the real power behind the throne. Kim Jong Eun's stability can be explained not by a solid grip on power but by the fact that the North Korean power elites need him as a symbolic focal point in order to protect their collective vested interests. However, even if Kim Jong Eun were to fall, the supporting group would be more likely to set up another Kim family member on the throne, such as Kim Jong Nam, Kim Pyong Il, or Kim Kyong Hee, than to step forward as leaders themselves.

The deepening of North Korea's crisis could lead to a power struggle or armed provocations, and we need to formulate a strategy to deal with this. Traditionally North Korea has employed a combination of provocations and dialogue; particularly recently, as its systemic crisis has deepened, it has tended to use provocations as a negotiating card. The progression West Sea battle→ Cheonan sinking→ Yeonpyeong Island shelling reveals a trend of provocations of progressively increasing severity. The problem is that the North Korean leadership, faced with a systemic crisis, has chosen to play the extreme card of adventurism and military provocations. Therefore we must be alert to the possibility that North Korea's military provocations may become more deliberately provoking, such as overland provocations disguised as "accidents" near the military demarcation line, terrorist acts by unknown perpetrators, etc. In this way North Korea may try to apply pressure by upping the risk factor on the peninsula in order to extract concessions from the South Korean government, and we must be prepared at all times for such moves.

The Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and the countries of the recent Jasmine Revolution were unable to avoid regime collapse despite the relatively stable power structures and robust diplomatic and security capabilities. What these cases had in common was the presence of widespread social problems such as poverty and unemployment due to a prolonged economic crisis. Under such circumstances, small events acted as catalysts for regime change. Considering this, in 2012 we must watch North Korea's internal situation carefully and prepare appropriate response strategies. We should pay particularly close attention to the "fractures within society" that are taking place inside North Korea.