At the beginning of 2011, the world was shaken by an “earthquake” which struck the Middle East and African regions. Following the Arab Spring or Jasmine Revolution, many pundits stated that North Korea could be the next to be affected by this wind of change, and the North Korean dictatorial leadership could collapse soon. This assumption acquired further validity soon after Kim Jong-il’s death. This paper draws on the democratic transition and consolidation literature that has grown considerably in the last decades. According to this literature, a few factors facilitate and promote democratization – most prominently, an elite split between hardliners and softliners; the emergence of civil society and its pro-democracy movement; and a certain degree of international pressure. Through an analysis of these factors, this paper shows why North Korea is “resistant to change” and will not follow in the Middle East’s footsteps. We argue that the main reason for the non-transition in North Korea is the absence of the conditions that have been identified in the democratization literature as critical factors promoting democratic transition.

**Key words:** North Korea, non-transition, Jasmine Revolution, elite split, civil society.

**Introduction**

At the beginning of 2011, the world was shaken by an “earthquake” which struck the Middle East region, enlarging its seismic movement to Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria, Bahrain, Yemen, Libya, Jordan, Morocco and other countries. The riot sparked off in the heart of Tunisia, where a young peddler, Mohamed Bouazizi, doused himself with flammable liquid and set himself on fire, dying a few days later.

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* The present paper is the outcome of a joint effort by the two authors. In practice, though, Fiori wrote the first, second, third and sixth sections while Kim wrote the fourth and fifth sections. Authors’ names appear in alphabetical order. Kim is the corresponding author.


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later. The case of Bouazizi was not the first of its kind, and, as always, it would have received limited coverage in the news, but the episode ignited a series of incidents and protests in the whole country. During the youngster’s funeral, in particular, many young people invaded the streets: the common denominator was that these people were young, cultured and educated, and above all unemployed and forced to accept low-skilled and low-paid jobs. Beyond better employment conditions, demonstrators asked for improved living conditions, a renovated political environment and a fairer wealth distribution in the country. The protests resulted in the escape of longtime President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to Saudi Arabia on 14 January 2011, putting an end to his 23 years in power.

Tunisian uprisings, immediately dubbed the “Jasmine Revolution,” ignited a series of protests that, with a domino effect, involved the entire region. Revolts against the governments erupted, some of them becoming severely violent, some facing strong suppression, and some resulting in various political changes. The major causes of this “revolution” in the Middle East region are common and share the same roots: protesters were in fact motivated by a similar set of socioeconomic grievances – high inflation, rising unemployment and falling real wages – and political objectives, the first of which was restoring basic freedoms that decades of authoritarianism had frustrated.

Soon after the echo of the Middle East riots became perceptible, some pundits started discussing the possible spread of the “revolution” to some countries of the Asian continent, like China and North Korea. In China some protests occurred, partly due to the vigorous spread of social media like Facebook and Twitter, but were immediately controlled and silenced by the government. North Korea, on the other hand, has remained largely impermeable to all these developments, constituting a notable exception. Towards the end of February 2011, in fact, it was reported in a few newspapers and by some online resources that multiple protests had erupted in the North Pyongan Province, in the cities of Sinuiju, Yongchon, Sonchon and Jongju, over difficult economic conditions. The main reasons for these protests in North Korea, however, seem more attributable to the demand of

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1. The term “Jasmine Revolution” has been widely used by Western media after Tunisia’s national flower and in keeping with the geopolitical nomenclature of “color revolutions.” Many Tunisians, however, prefer to use “Dignity Revolution” to describe the 2011 events, because “Jasmine Revolution” was the term Ben Ali introduced in 1987 to describe his own takeover.
food than to concerted mobilization, which did not occur. The populace in certain zones of the country was, and probably still is, starving because of the failed currency reform attempted by the regime in November 2009, and as a consequence of the international sanctions imposed after the most recent provocations of the North Korean regime. Despite the enthusiastic tones of some Western journalists, the Middle Eastern wind of change has not blown in Pyongyang; on the contrary, this “impermeability” to change has been reinforced by the transfer of power into the hands of the young new leader Kim Jong-un. There are good reasons to think that North Korea is not going to undergo a historic transition at any time soon.

The main purpose of this paper is to explain the persistent non-transition in North Korea. Why is North Korea so impervious to dramatic changes that happened in other parts of the world? Why do those factors that precipitated changes in other countries not emerge and develop in North Korea? In particular, we analyze the North Korean case in the light of the literature on democratic transition and consolidation. We argue that the main reason why the North Korean regime is different from those regimes torn down by protestors in the Middle East and will not be subject to the same destiny is the absence of the conditions that have been identified in the democratization literature as critical factors promoting democratic transition. The paper specifically proceeds as follows. In the next section, we summarize the “collapse of North Korea” debate over the past few decades and discuss how the existing literature on democratization can inform and illuminate the debate. In the following three sections we examine in detail the factors that are considered crucial in a transition to democracy, that is, international pressure, elite split and civil society. Based on our examination of all the factors that are presumed to promote and facilitate democratic transition, we conclude in the final section that persistent non-transition will continue to characterize North Korea in the future.

The “Collapsist Debate” and the Literature on Democratization

North Korea’s allegedly imminent collapse has been theorized – and sometimes even invoked – since the disintegration of the Communist bloc. The “collapse of North Korea” theory was especially popular during the Kim Young-sam government (1993–1998) and functioned as a fundamental (albeit implicit) policy consensus during the Lee Myung-bak government (2008–2013). It argues that economic stresses – most prominently expressed in the widespread famine and acute food emergency – and other systemic weaknesses would make the North Korean regime break down. The “collapse” theory was reinforced by the ratifica-

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tion of the 1994 Geneva Agreed Framework: Pyongyang’s decision to bargain away its nuclear weapons program for oil and resources – unexpected by many in Washington – was considered to be another piece of evidence of the difficulties the regime was experiencing. To those who criticized the decision to provide Pyongyang with civilian nuclear power reactors in return for the freeze, one official replied that the construction of the reactors would take a long time “and that is almost certainly a sufficient period of time for their regime to have collapsed. The country simply won’t exist then because it will have been absorbed by South Korea.”

This kind of declaration became the norm during that period.

North Korea’s systemic weaknesses were to become more and more palpable after the death of the “Great Leader” Kim Il-sung. North Korea, according to South Korean President Kim Young-sam’s evaluation, was nothing more than “a broken airplane” headed for a crash-landing that would be followed by a quick reunification of the peninsula. This impression was again shared by the Americans: in 1996 the then-Commander of the United States Forces Korea (USFK), General Gary Luck, declared during his testimony before the House Armed Services Committee that “the question is not will this country [North Korea] disintegrate, but rather how it will disintegrate, by implosion or explosion, and when.” Soon after, a US government and outside team of experts envisaged a regime collapse in North Korea within 5 years.

These prognostications, like many others of their kind, have constantly proven false. The North Korean regime not only survived the death of its “Great Leader,” but during the following era, under the guidance of Kim Jong-il, it endured a dramatic famine during which no large civil protests were launched or detected: at that time “North Korea’s starving farmers did not rebel. They just died.”

More recently, in the wake of the Arab Spring protests in the Middle East, the “collapse” discussion has been revived. One of the first scholars who studied the likelihood of a revolution analogous to the Arab Spring occurring in North Korea was Andrei Lankov, who, even before the death of the “Dear Leader” Kim Jong-il, took into consideration two main factors conducive to the outburst of a revolution. The first reflection is that revolutions do not take place when people are really desperate and are usually not conceived by those belonging to the lowest class of society: as it happened in Eastern Europe and Russia, the “intellectual circles” are frequently responsible for the ignition and guidance of uprisings that lead to social

modification. However, it is absolutely evident that these kinds of circles are neither present nor allowed in North Korea, because their existence could be highly detrimental to the regime. The second reflection is that, as Lankov argues, “people start revolutions when they know alternatives to the current system.” This means that, unlike Tunisia and Egypt, where people had enjoyed far more comfortable lives before the Arab Spring, North Koreans largely ignore the world around them, and this lack of information does not allow for the construction – or even visualization – of possible political alternatives.

In addition, many suppose that the North Korean leadership closely monitored the development of the situation in the Middle East and, as a consequence, they obscured any information about the revolution that could spread inside their country and possibly restricted the movements of the personnel in friend countries like Libya, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates, fearing that rumors on the uprising could create tensions within the population. As a result, the control over mobile phones, computer and any intrusion of foreign culture through Chinese and South Korean channels was immediately tightened up. The unavailability of these devices, in Fared Zakaria’s opinion, gravely limits the possibility that the discontent could go through the same channels as in Egypt and Tunisia.

After Kim Jong-il’s death there has been polarization among scholars concerning North Korea’s future. On the one side, there were those academics who were convinced that, contrary to what many were predicting and even hoping, the power transition to young and inexperienced Kim Jong-un would not create instability, because in North Korea an opposition to the hereditary succession would mean an opposition to the state itself. On the other side, some scholars maintained that even though the leading causes that had sparked protests across the Arab world were “conspicuously absent in the case of North Korea,” the outcome could eventually be the same at a certain point, especially because the “combination of bottom-up societal shifts counteracted by rigid, top-down repression efforts is creating a tension in the North that could give way someday soon creating a political earthquake in the country.” Cha observed that the Arab Spring pointed to

10. According to The Korea Herald, less than 1% of the North’s population, mainly senior cadres, have heard anything about the uprisings. It is not clear, however, how this data was measured.
15. Ibid., p. 21.
a more repressive posture assumed by the regime in the case it felt threatened; in the end, a system like the North Korean one simply “cannot hold, and we should all be ready when the moment of truth for this dictatorship arrives.”

More than 20 years after the “collapse of North Korea” theory first appeared, there exists no strong evidence that the North Korean regime will collapse anytime soon. Despite numerous arguments over the past two decades or so for the feasibility and desirability of regime collapse, the history has so far proved that those arguments are largely erroneous. The North Korean regime still exists, and its non-transition is persistent. To analyze the reasons behind the persistent absence of democratic transition in North Korea, it is crucial to reflect on and extract relevant lessons from the existing literature on democratization. Rather than narrowly focusing on North Korea to analyze its regime (in)stability, we in this paper try to connect North Korea to the larger and richer literature on democratic transition and consolidation. In other words, we intend to bring North Korea out of the North Koreanologist framework and place it in a Comparative Political one.

In the democratization literature, regime collapse and democratic transition are not the same. Collapse is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for democratic transition. Authoritarian collapse might lead to the inauguration of another (or even more) authoritarian regime. On the other hand, democratic transition does not always occur through the collapse of a regime. According to Terry Karl, the four modes/types of democratic transition comprise, depending on the relative strength of actors (i.e., elite ascendant vs mass ascendant) and the strategies of transition (i.e., compromise vs force): (i) pact (elite, compromise); (ii) reform (mass, compromise); (iii) imposition (elite, force); and (iv) revolution (mass, force). Similarly, according to Samuel Huntington, the four modes of transition include: (i) transformation (top-down, elite-controlled change within the government); (ii) transplacement (reform negotiated between elites and the opposition); (iii) replacement (regime breakdown/collapse or “rupture”); and (iv) intervention (by foreign powers). As is clear from these two widely accepted typologies of democratic transition in the field, transitions that involve collapse are only revolution/replacement or imposition/intervention, and these types are relatively rare compared with pact/transformation or reform/transplacement. In this regard, as far as the North Korean case is concerned, the hitherto emphasis by both academics and policy-makers on “collapse” is misfocused and biased. We should

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put the North Korean case in a broader theoretical context, also taking into account gradual transition types that do not necessarily entail collapse.

Over the past few decades, works on democratic transition and consolidation have proliferated, with a number of major findings on those factors that are conducive to democratization.19 According to the extensive and still growing literature on democratization, scholars have generally agreed on three factors facilitating and promoting democratization:20 (i) various types of international pressure;21 (ii) an elite split between “hardliners” and “softliners;”22 and (iii) the emergence of civil society and its pro-democracy movement.23

Of these three factors, we first examine international pressure, because it is easier to demonstrate its inapplicability to the case of North Korea. Regarding the other two factors (i.e., elite split and civil society), we will conduct a more detailed analysis in the following two sections. This line of analysis conforms with the general literature on democratization (often referred to as “transitology”), because there exists a much greater number of works on elite and civil society than international pressure, and historically more transitions have been caused by the former two factors than the latter one.

20. In addition to the three factors we examine in this paper, there exist other factors such as socioeconomic, cultural, or historical ones. But these factors are considered to be mostly background/contextual conditions, not direct causes of democratization. The recent trend in the literature has been to focus on “contingent” and “strategic” factors, rather than “structural” conditions. For examples of socioeconomic development as a background condition for opening up “windows of opportunity” for democratization, see Seymour M. Lipset, *Political Man* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1960); Larry Diamond, “Economic Development and Democracy Reconsidered,” *American Behavioral Scientist*, 35-4/5 (March/June 1992), pp. 450–499; and Adam Przeworski, Michael E. Alvarez, José Antonio Cheibub and Fernando Limongi, *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World, 1950–1990* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
International Pressure

In the literature on democratic transition and consolidation, external and international conditions favorable to democratic change include, for example, defeat in a war or explicit or implicit pressure by other countries. In the case of North Korea, none of these factors seem to figure prominently or have worked effectively.

In the last two decades, North Korea’s relations with the international community have often been tumultuous and on two occasions, efficaciously named the first and the second nuclear crisis (respectively, 1994 and 2002), a serious military confrontation has been – fortunately for the Korean peninsula – avoided.

In recent times, although not always in complete agreement with each other, the South Korean governments and their American counterparts have in the main joined forces in the implementation of what the Obama administration later epitomized as “strategic patience” on the Korean peninsula: both administrations have untiringly proclaimed that North Korea has to renounce any kind of nuclear weapons and make step to return to the concerted solution of the Six-Party Talks. It seems evident – by looking at the strengthening of alliances with South Korea and Japan – that the United States is trying to convince the North Koreans to renounce their nuclear arsenal, while limiting China’s growing power in the region. In addition, although the military alliances with Seoul and Tokyo remain valid, Washington is pressuring Beijing to exert some influence on Pyongyang in order to soften the tones.

North Korean regime collapse is not the best option for the United States, and Washington is not going to support regime change. Such an option was taken into account with respect to some countries in the Middle East, but an intervention in North Korea could eventually lead China to intervene. Secondly, it would be too difficult for the United States to control and manage the outcomes of an eventual regime change in North Korea, primarily because the reaction of the military would be hard to predict. In addition, such a situation would conflict with China’s interests. Therefore, it is highly probable that the best option for the United States is strengthening the military alliance with its allies in the region while working for a peaceful negotiation with Pyongyang on its nuclear weapon program. Regime change through military intervention does not seem to be a viable option for the United States.

North Korea’s international positioning has always been clearly intertwined with its traditional “ally,” the People’s Republic of China, and, to a lesser extent after 1989, with Russia. Both of these countries’ approach is aimed at maintaining the status quo within the “hermit kingdom.” The People’s Republic of China, North Korea’s largest supporter and ideological partner, has always supported the idea of a reunified Korean peninsula, but this event must be achieved peacefully and through a mutual decision of people on both sides of the border.24 It is,


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however, hardly believable that something comparable to the Arab Spring could lead to a peaceful reunification of the Korean peninsula. It is clear that the Chinese vision of North Korea is becoming more and more diversified in different circles of power: the official line is gradually being affected by numerous alternative views of what the relationship with Pyongyang should be. However, there are a few recurring elements that make us believe that China will likely continue to support the North Korean regime, even though Pyongyang’s nuclear deterrence is giving Beijing a chronic headache.

The first reason why Beijing is so interested in preserving the status quo in North Korea is related to the balance of power on the Korean peninsula: to Chinese eyes the American strategy – exacerbated by the so-called “pivot to Asia” launched at the end of 2011 by the Obama administration – is aimed at a containment of China’s influence, and for this reason it is important to maintain a security buffer, represented by North Korea. This is of real importance especially because the Americans are strengthening their alliances and military cooperation with several actors in the Asia–Pacific, including Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. The second reason is the usual fear that a possible collapse of the North Korean regime could mean a significant influx of refugees on the Chinese borders. Finally, since the Chinese have established a solid trade and economic relationship with South Korea, which is immensely more significant than the economic cooperation with the North, it is unlikely that Beijing would endanger its economic profits. Therefore, even though it is manifest that inside the Chinese government there might be different opinions about the nature of the relationship that Beijing should build and develop with Pyongyang, maintaining the status quo is the most straightforward and convenient way not to jeopardize regional stability. In the remote eventuality of a popular uprising in North Korea, the Chinese would do what they could to preserve the status quo and to help the Kim regime stabilize the situation. Pundits have casually underlined the extent to which China can influence North Korea’s domestic policies and foreign policy behaviors. However, as far as the issue of North Korea’s regime change toward democratization is concerned, the influence of China has been and will continue to be marginal, focusing on the preservation of the authoritarian status quo.

In addition, it must be highlighted that the pressure par excellence exerted by the international community towards Pyongyang, in the form of sanctions, seems to have found scarce success. The history of sanctions against North Korea is long and varied: from the UNSCR 0825 voted in 1993 to UNSCR 2094 passed in March 2013, North Korea has been sanctioned in various forms and for different reasons. The efficacy of these sanctions, particularly for igniting any kind of transition in North Korea, is disputed. First, economic restraints are very well known in the “hermit kingdom” and are not dreaded. Enduring hardships, even starvation, is seen in North Korea as being much more preferable than capitulating to outside pressure. It goes without saying that the effects of economic sanctions are felt almost exclusively by common people, not by the regime, while the commitment
to the nuclear program remains substantially untouched, since it is the key to the survival of the regime itself. Second, the major actors involved have not been sufficiently cooperative or coordinated in implementing and sustaining sanctions against Pyongyang. Despite having supported the official international community’s stance, China and Russia have traditionally tried to soften the tones against North Korea and have constantly remained reluctant to push too hard. Once again, the reason behind this attitude is probably that Beijing does not want a collapse of the North Korean regime to provoke a flood of refugees and the possibility of the creation of a unified, pro-American Korea on its borders. At the same time, many have called for a tougher attitude of the United States in the implementation of sanctions toward Pyongyang, blaming Washington for its open-endedness dictated by the fear that the regime could respond firmly, throwing the region into disorder. Lastly, even though North Korea has been subjected to rounds of sanctions for years, it is still in the position to perform effectively in military terms, as demonstrated by the rocket launch to put a satellite into orbit (December 2012) and the third nuclear test (February 2013). These successes confirm that sanctions have not produced a useful hamper to the fulfillment of North Korea’s major military achievements.

Of the three main factors facilitating and causing democratic transition, if we exclude international pressure, which currently does not work for North Korea, the discussion ultimately boils down to the two remaining factors that could potentially contribute to a transition: elite split and civil society, which are also the most widely discussed factors in transitology. In the following two sections, we examine these factors in greater detail.

**Elite Split**

To understand the absence of elite split in North Korea, it is imperative to explore first the development of the North Korean political system during 45 years under Kim Il-song (1949–1994). When Kim Il-song emerged as one of the most promising leaders in North Korea during 1945–1946, he was competing with several other leaders who had led communist and nationalist movements in and outside of the country. Despite strong support from the Soviet Union, it was initially challenging for the “Great Leader” to monopolize power. After the Korean War (1950–1953) and throughout the 1950s, however, Kim Il-song gradually solidified his power, carrying out a series of political purges to remove hostile factions and opponent leaders from the political arena. As a consequence, the ruling bloc that emerged by the mid-1960s was a highly unified group of old revolutionaries and comrades who were extremely loyal to Kim Il-song. Moreover, into the 1970s and the 1980s, Kim Il-song systematically established and consolidated his personal rule, developing *Juche* (self-reliance) ideology centered around his status and role of *Suryong* (“Supreme Leader”). No challenges to *Suryong* and his *Juche* ideology – either from within the ruling bloc or from the popular sector – were tolerated.
In particular, the Suryong system, strongly influenced by the Confucian tradition, has served to legitimize the Kim family regime: Kim Il Sung is the father of the Korean nation, and Kim Jong-il the dutiful son who carries on his father’s legacy. The same applies to Kim Jong-un. In order to support this system, the regime has created a sophisticated cult of personality that, for example, makes it mandatory for each North Korean citizen to wear a lapel pin with the effigy of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong-il, to make a pilgrimage to the founder of the nation’s birthplace in the Mangyongdae section of Pyongyang, and to have the two Kims’ portraits in every household or public office. Both leaders’ lives are punctuated with mythological events. The entire society is tightly regimented, controlled, and monitored.25

That the leadership under Kim Il-song was exceptionally united and did not allow any internal split or dissent is strongly confirmed by many prominent North Korea experts who have characterized North Korea as a “totalitarian regime.”26 Kim Il-song’s rule went well beyond an authoritarian27 or a sultanistic regime.28 Some observers have even characterized the North Korean polity as a “theocracy” in which Kim Il-song was revered as a (demi)god and many of his relatives, including his great grandfather, grandfather, and parents were all depicted as national heroes engaged in a fierce anti-American and anti-Japanese national independence movement. Everything related to Kim Il-song, such as his birthplace, was sacred, and so many aspects of North Korean politics became “religionized.”29

Such exceptional elite unity and cohesiveness, although slightly changed in nature and intensity, continued into the Kim Jong-il era. The transition from Kim Il-song to Kim Jong-il was not an abrupt decision of crisis management. From the early 1970s, the potential “succession” problem was handled with great care by the North Korean leadership. Therefore, Kim Jong-il’s “formal” inauguration in 1997 was by no means a product of internal power struggles following his father’s death. Rather, it represented the finale of a well-orchestrated leadership succession. This is why Hwang Jang-yop, the main architect of North Korea’s Juche ideology and

the highest government official ever to defect to South Korea, asserted that the North Korean leadership during the 1974–1994 period was Kim–Kim joint rule.30

The most important aspect of Kim Jong-il’s leadership structure was the increased status of the National Defense Commission and the institutionalized participation of active military officers in politics. Kim Jong-il abolished the office of the President of the Republic, and designated the office of the Chairman of the National Defense Commission (himself) as the highest office, designated the Chairman of the Standing Committee of the Supreme People’s Assembly to perform administrative and ceremonial functions formerly performed by the head of the state. Under Kim Jong-il, professional military officers on active duty were allowed to dominate the government.31 Songun chongchi (Military-First Politics), according to Kim Jong-il, was the most effective way to defend and protect “the North Korean style socialism (urisik sahoe chuui).” It was also believed to be the surest way to achieve a strong and “affluent nation (kangsong taeguk).”

Kim Jong-il allocated a lot of resources and prestige to the military to guarantee its loyalty to him. The military economy, deputed to feed and equip national troops, had greater priority over national resources than the civilian economy.32 In 2009, the North Korean regime implemented a monetary reform ordering the exchange of old currency for new currency at a rate of 100 to 1. This caused the collapse of buying power for ordinary citizens, but it was decided that government workers, including especially military personnel, should be paid at pre-currency reform levels, even increasing their purchasing power. Therefore, even when economic reforms ended in complete failure, military members still benefited.33

The system of comprehensive and constant surveillance of the military, which had been well established during the Kim Il-song era, was still in place. As a result, Kim Jong-il was in solid control of the military.34 The affirmation of the Songun philosophy, which was not altered even during the period of food shortages and famine in the country, made the Korean People’s Army responsible for internal security as well as defense of the nation. A disproportionate amount of the annual budget was reserved for the military.

Kim Jong-il used several ideological and institutional mechanisms to prevent and preempt potential elite splits. First of all, in the revised Constitution of 1998,

31. Dae Sook Suh, op. cit., pp. 73–78.

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which was also called the Kim Il-song Constitution,35 Kim Il-song was characterized and presented as the founding father and the permanent president of the nation. He was an immortal leader who would stay with North Korean people forever. In contrast to the overshadowing legacy of Kim Il-song, Kim Jong-il’s role seemed rather limited: he was basically in charge of military affairs. By pursuing rule by Kim Il-song’s legacy (yuhun tongchi) and staying under Kim Il-song’s shadow, Kim Jong-il was able to take advantage of the fertile and rich wellspring of legitimacy bequeathed by Kim Il-song and could unite the elite as a whole. In other words, Kim Jong-il enhanced his political legitimacy and ensured elite unity through preserving and retaining Kim II-song’s legacies and memories.

Moreover, Kim Jong-il also adroitly modified the contents of Juche ideology, which had been one of the two main pillars of North Korean society36 and the most powerful ideological tool to control and manage North Koreans. Resisting or failing to practice Juche was a cardinal crime in North Korea. Earlier during its formative years, Juche emphasized political independence (chaju), economic self-reliance (charip), and military self-defense (chawi). Under Kim Jong-il, however, Juche was more about “protecting the Supreme Leader to death (suryong kyolsa ongwi chongsin).”37 Thus modified, Juche freed Kim Jong-il from potential criticisms of policy errors (in foreign relations, economic and military affairs) and required absolute loyalty to himself. Such reinterpretation of Juche effectively muted any dissent within the ruling elite.

Overall, the North Korean regime under Kim Jong-il remained totalitarian. As was true with a few historical cases of totalitarianism, the North Korean elite did not have any cleavage. The North Korean elite shared a common value system and Weltanschauung, with unity and cohesiveness stronger than in other countries. Rather than taking different approaches on policy issues and thus risking being at variance with Kim Jong-il and his Juche ideology, North Korean elites strived to reach a consensus, to maintain a sense of community, and to hold on to their collective interests and prerogatives.38

In 2008, Kim Jong-il failed to appear at major events: this fostered the speculation of a serious illness, probably a stroke, that had affected the Dear Leader. Immediately, many started talking about the possible collapse of the North Korean regime and began analyzing the possible future scenarios. In April 2009, Kim Jong-il reappeared in public, but it became evident that something was indeed happening in the framework of succession to the Dear Leader: the National Defense Commission was expanded to include new representation from a variety

35. For the full text, see Bukhan yonguso [Center for North Korean Studies], ed., Bukhan Daesajon [A Big Dictionary of North Korea] (Seoul: Bukhan Yonguso, 1999).
37. Seong Chang Cheong, op. cit.

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of public security agencies. But more importantly, there were many signs that the
official successor had already been designated in the person of Kim Jong-il’s third
son, Jong-un. This hereditary succession surely contributed to making of North
Korea a unique example from a political point of view – a formal “communist”
regime in which the power was transmitted in a direct way – but it was also the
most expected eventuality because direct transmission of power could in a sense
protect the integrity of the regime leaving untouched all the elites’ privileges.

Kim Jong-un officially became the new leader after his father’s death in December 2011. It seems clear now that Kim Jong-un is distancing himself from his late
father, choosing a different approach and a different ideological paradigm. And,
looking at the Arab experience, the economic situation of the country could be a
dangerous symptom for the new leader. The difficult economic conditions in North
Korea have been further exacerbated by the suspension of help from the other
states following the military incidents of 2010 – the sinking of the South Korean
corvette Chonan and the shelling on the South Korean island of Yonpyong. The
population of the country is highly impoverished after bad economic reforms and
has many troubles in dealing with ordinary life. The consciousness that people in
bordering countries, even in China, have much better and easier lives could create
a dangerous feeling of disenchantment among North Koreans. For Kim Jong-un, it
is risky to continue his father’s military-first policy.

At the same time, however, Kim Jong-un’s power is highly dependent on the
military’s support, and any attempt to “marginalize” the military will be feroc-
iously resisted. The importance of the military for regime stability was clearly
evidenced by the appointment of Kim Jong-un as four-star general in the Korea
People’s Army, his nomination as vice chairman of the Party’s Central Military
Commission, and as a member of the Party’s Central Committee. In addition, it
seems that he was credited in the domestic media for the Chonan sinking and the
attack on Yonpyong Island.

It is perhaps too early to conclusively characterize Kim Jong-un’s leadership and
the elite structure under him. As was demonstrated by Ri Yong-ho’s purge in July
2012, it seems reasonably clear that in contrast to the Kim Jong-il era, the military
elite will not dominate the key decision-making process. At the same time,
however, Jang Song-taek’s sudden execution in December 2013 indicates that
Kim’s leadership will not rely heavily on technocrats. There will be some adjust-
ment of power distribution between the military and economic reform technocrats.
In the end, due to Kim Jong-un’s reliance on the military, the power adjustment
will not be so radical that it threatens the military’s interest or/and jeopardizes
regime stability.39

[Changes in and Prospects of the Kim Jong Un Regime: Elite’s Policy Choices],” Bukhan Gyongje
Review [The North Korean Economy Review], ed. KDI (Korea Development Institute) (October
2012).

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In summary, under Kim Jong-un, it is rather infeasible that an elite split between “hardliners” (for example, the military) and “softliners” (for example, economic reform technocrats) emerges and evolves seriously. Economic reform technocrats will likely be able to generate and exert greater policy influence as compared with the preceding Kim Jong-il period. However, they will be significantly checked and balanced by the military elite on which Kim Jong-un relies heavily for his legitimacy and authority. There will be no serious split between different types of the elite. Kim Jong-un will be able to manage the intra-elite tension by supporting and privileging the military elite whenever conflict becomes too menacing.

Civil Society

Discussing “civil society” in North Korea is particularly frustrating. According to the existing literature on democratic transition and consolidation, civil society is:

A set of self-organized groups and movements in society that are relatively autonomous from the state, basic units of production and reproduction, and political society, and are capable of political activities in the public sphere to express their concerns and advance their interests according to the principles of pluralism and self-governance.40

In this way, civil society plays crucial roles in facilitating authoritarian breakdown, democratic transition, and democratic consolidation.41

As is manifest from its definition, a pivotal characteristic of “civil society” is its “autonomy” from the state.42 In this regard, it is highly questionable whether historically any political and social groups and organizations in North Korea have ever commanded any, however limited and imperfect, independence of the state. As mentioned above, that many North Korean experts still, quite fittingly, classify North Korea as a “totalitarian” regime unequivocally illustrates that the autonomous “intermediate space” or the “public sphere” is seriously wanting in North Korea.

There exist about 100 “mass groups” in North Korea today. Some groups, such as the Korean Vocational Federation (Choson chigop chongdongmaeng), the Federation of Agricultural Workers (Nongop kulloja tongmaeng), the Korean Literature and Arts Federation (Choson munhak yesul chongdongmaeng), and the Journalists’ Federation (Kija tongmaeng), are based on social strata and vocational categories. Other groups, including the Korean Federation of Socialist Labor Youth (Choson sahoejuui nodong chongnyon tongmaeng), the Korean Democratic Women’s Federation (Choson minju yosong tongmaeng), and the Youth Federation

40. Sunhyuk Kim, op. cit.
41. Ibid.
(Sonyondan), are based on either gender or age groups. However, all these social groups without exception perform such roles as “extensively educating and indoctrinating the public,” “serving as the transmission belt connecting the mass and the party,” and “working as the faithful assistant of the party.”

There are several different methods of social control in North Korea, which all place severe constraints on social groups and their activities. The most important and effective tool of social control, what a CIA report has summarized as one of the two “pillars” of North Korean society, is *songbun* (political classification system). *Songbun* is an elaborate system of citizen profiling, according to individuals’ family background, ideological orientations, and, above all, loyalty to the North Korean regime and leadership. What significantly augments and enhances the system of *songbun* is *yongoje* (family purge). Under this system, individuals are punished not only for their wrongdoings but also for those of their direct and extended family members, relatives, friends, and colleagues. All North Koreans are expected to inform on one another, even children on their parents. If they do not report a crime and it is disclosed, they are implicated. *Yongoje* has proved extremely effective “in deterring all but the most brave, selfish, or reckless individuals from going against the Kim regime.”

Underpinning these elaborate systems of political classification and family purge is the ubiquity of government intelligence agencies. Examples include the Ministry of People’s Security (MPS, *Sahoe anjonbu*), the State Security Department (SSD, *Kukka anjon powibu*), the Military Security Command (MSC, *Powi saryongbu*), the Committee in Charge of Socialist Legal Practice (*Sahoejuui pommu saenghwal chido wiwonhoe*), and People’s Watch (*Inminban*). Of these agencies, the MPS and the SSD are most powerful and significant.

The MPS is in charge of overseeing and monitoring citizens, investigating and profiling citizens’ backgrounds, approving changes in residence or job, and authorizing domestic travels. It is also responsible for overseeing a national police force responsible for maintaining law and order, investigating common criminal cases, and conducting preliminary examinations. In essence, the MPS’s function is a combination of policing, public safety, intelligence and counterintelligence. If the MPS detects a dissident or disloyalty case, it hands the case over to the SSD, which is comparable to the Soviet KGB. The department has several charges: searching for anti-state criminals, conducting domestic and foreign operations of intelligence and counterintelligence, operating political prison camps, and keeping tabs on individuals.

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44. Ibid., p. 65.
45. Helen-Louise Hunter, *op. cit.*, p. 3. The other pillar, as mentioned above, is *Juche* ideology.
North Korean personnel abroad. These security organizations permeate every sector of society and monitor the private and public life of North Korean citizens and also foreign visitors. The security establishment remains intrinsically untouched after the power transition to Kim Jong-il and later to Kim Jong-un, although the new leaders have tried to install their own security aides, in an attempt to strengthen their personal authority and the party’s leadership role as well as to rebalance the power relationship between key players and the main security institutions.

Meanwhile, constant political education, socialization, and lifetime indoctrination also profoundly affect North Koreans’ psyches, attitudes, and behaviors. Brainwashing comprises endless political study sessions and criticisms and self-criticisms. It also includes re-education of diplomats, workers abroad, and workers in South Korea’s joint venture companies. The pervasive presence of the party into every organized social interaction is finalized both to exert capillary control and to obstruct the development of revolutionary political activities.

Equally inimical to the possible burgeoning of civil society in North Korea is tight information control by the government. No foreign newspapers, radio or TV broadcasts are allowed. Lack of alternative sources of information prevents people from judging the validity of the Kim regime’s constant negative propaganda about the outside world. Even with respect to very limited information that manages to seep into the country, the North Korean leadership makes clear that such “imperialistic pollution” is designed by North Korea’s enemies to undermine socialist beliefs and those who share it with others will be severely punished. Under this tight information control, North Koreans have only two kinds of comparisons available: between the North Korea now and the North Korea in the past and between North Korea and the other “corrupt,” “egocentric” capitalist countries. In addition, it must be noted how the North Korean regime, in order to prevent any kind of internal revolution, has carefully avoided – or highly limited – the rise of groups whose presence could be detrimental to the regime: intellectuals, students, and clergymen.

The emergence and evolution of civil society are to a great extent dependent on the level of socioeconomic development. Lack of any substantial socioeconomic development significantly hampers the emergence and evolution of civil society in North Korea. Due to its concerns about unintended, largely deleterious, consequences of economic reform, such as “ideological contamination,” North Korean leadership has been reluctant about economic opening and reform. As a result, the “reform” in North Korea since the 1980s has oscillated between practical efforts to

48. Ibid., p. 278.
51. Ibid., pp. 142–143.

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earn badly needed foreign currency via limited economic opening and strong emphasis on self-reliance and anti-imperialism.  

When Kim Jong-il died, he left a country in a moribund economic state, as a result of his Songun policy that fed an ambitious missile and nuclear program at the expense of a malnourished population. Some observers predict that Kim Jong-un, the Swiss-educated heir, could start a series of economic reforms. There have indeed been official statements and personnel changes in support of economic development. It seems plausible that the intent to rebuild the economy, as a future policy objective, is a consequence of the uncooperative relations with Seoul and frictions with the United States. This situation, in fact, leaves the North to rely solely on China for its economic push. However, even if this process of economic reform finds any implementation, it seems highly unlikely that in the near future it could change the scenario so dramatically that the general population would be relieved from the condition of acknowledged poverty.

It has been widely assumed that the main vehicle for the ignition and diffusion of the Arab Spring uprisings in the Middle East was the Internet, and in particular widespread social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. In Egypt and Tunisia, both characterized by relatively young and tech-savvy populations, the Internet – according to many – has played a decisive role, even “producing” the fall of regimes thought to have control of the web. Technologies, active even before the revolutions, have helped people interested in democracy build extensive networks, create social capital, and organize political action. Internet use in both countries is significant, stimulated ironically by the government’s traditional censorship and harsh control on the media, and mobile phone use is widespread. Soon after Bouazizi’s desperate act, activists have constantly covered the events by spreading accounts and videos on the web. Social media were highly effective not only in shaping political debates and spreading democratic ideas in the countries involved in the protests, but also in channeling discontent toward the regimes and organizing the tactics of protest.

In North Korea, the fruition of the Internet is extremely limited: “normal” citizens do not have any access to the web, even though Kwangmyong – a sort of intranet that ties together different institutions (libraries and universities, for example) but that does not allow any possibility of “external projection” – was introduced at the beginning of the century. Some North Koreans have unfiltered access to the Internet, but this seems to be available only to a very selected elite. The Star Joint Venture Co. – a joint venture between the North Korean government’s Post and Telecommunications Corporation and Thailand-based Loxley Pacific – provides Internet connection in the country. Before the implementation of
the Star Joint Venture Co., connections were possible via a cross-border hook-up to China Netcom or via satellite to Germany.53

Whereas the Internet is heavily guarded, the technology infrastructure is much more porous for mobile phones. The relative diffusion of mobile devices started around the beginning of the century, but in May 2004 cell phones were banned across the country, possibly because of the uncontrollable expansion of pre-paid devices along the Chinese borders.54 The ban was lifted in mid-2008, when Orascom Telecommunications, a part of an Egyptian conglomerate, penned a $US400m deal with North Korea to provide 3G service covering a huge part of the country. In the last few years, the number of mobile users in North Korea has boomed, reaching possibly 2,000,000 in May 2013.55 The government is extremely attentive and suspicious of these devices: they cannot access the Internet and can only make calls within the country, since international calls are blocked. For a short time, foreigners in the country were able to use mobile Internet, but this access was later revoked. It is believed, however, that many in North Korea, particular those near the borders, use illegally owned mobiles to contact people outside the country; the possession of illegal devices remains a very major crime.

Overall, it is quite unlikely that North Korea’s change can be ignited or helped by the widespread use of technology, as in the case of Tunisia and Egypt. Given the absence of a civil society or political opposition, it is unlikely that some sort of social unrest will originate from the use of the Internet or cell phones. It should also be noted that the capillarity of controls exerted by security institutions is strengthened by mutual controls among citizens and even by self-control derived from the extreme pervasiveness of the North Korean regime. Therefore, the risk is that instead of being detrimental to the stability of the regime, cell phones could provide a pretext to strengthening and expanding social control and surveillance in the country.

In summary, civil society in North Korea is dismal. The North Korean society, tightly controlled and monitored by state security institutions, has neither the capacity nor the intention to rebel against the authoritarian regime. Mechanisms and devices of social and ideological control are ubiquitous. The lack of socio-economic development and the continuation of the dire economic situation seriously

55. This figure is highly disputed; nonetheless, it refers to the number of subscribers to the 3G service, Koryolink, that was launched in December 2008 by CHEO Technology JV Company, a joint venture between the Egyptian telecommunications firm Orascom and the North Korean Korea Post and Telecommunications Corporation. See Yonho Kim, “A Closer Look at the ‘Explosion of Cell Phone Subscribers’ in North Korea,” 38 North (26 November 2013), at http://38north.org/2013/11/ykim112613/ (searched date: 1 December 2013).
militate against the emergence and evolution of civil society in North Korea. The Internet and mobile phones do not seem to have great potential in effecting a significant change in North Korea either. All in all, civil society, which played crucial roles in many countries democratized earlier in the 1970s and 1980s, does not seem to exist in any meaningful fashion in North Korea today and, if it does exist, it does not seem to promise any significant role in promoting democratic transition there in the near future.

Conclusion

The prospect of democratic change in North Korea is rather bleak at the moment. None of the three factors that arguably facilitate and promote democratic transition – that is, elite split, civil society, or international pressure – exist in North Korea. In this sense, non-transition in North Korea is “overdetermined.”

Two of the three factors favorable to democratic development, that is, civil society and international pressure, interact closely with each other and with the contextual condition of socioeconomic development. According to Lipset’s classic “optimistic equation,” socioeconomic development brings about various changes in class structure and promotes the emergence and development of civil society.56 Socioeconomic development is also frequently propelled by deeper incorporation into the global market system and adoption of an export-oriented industrialization strategy. Meanwhile, the growth and empowerment of civil society heavily relies on the greater opening of the economy and free exchanges of information with outside world. Also, activities and campaigns of international human rights organizations and financial institutions become more effective and powerful in synergy with a vibrant domestic civil society. Moreover, these three factors are also fairly long-term ones: None of these three factors could be obtained in a short period of time. It takes a long time to achieve socioeconomic development, to generate and empower civil society, and to activate and augment international pressure.

Therefore, the only factor that is relatively variable in the short run is elite split. For the time being, Kim Jong-un is likely to pursue a cautious and limited industrialization strategy, carefully maintaining and managing the balance between generals and technocrats. If reform is successfully pursued, it will effectively keep the military silent and as the most loyal and crucial power base for Kim. If reform does not go well and negatively affects the interests of the military, however, the military might be prompted to dissent. Meanwhile, technocrats, however small in number, might demand more fundamental reconsideration of the existing development strategy. In either scenario, it is not entirely unimaginable that the elite unity as it stands today might undergo some form of transformation.

The real dilemma in crafting a viable North Korea policy is that the factor with the greatest likelihood, that is, elite split, is also the factor with the least controllability. Neither the United States nor South Korea is able to penetrate North Korea to influence elite strategies and interactions. Therefore, US and South Korean governments have no option but to focus on enhancing the other, more long-term conditions.

Particularly worrisome in this context is the gradually but significantly aggravated relationship between South Korea and North Korea during Lee Myung-bak’s government. It is not unreasonable to suspect that another version of the collapse-of-North-Korea theory was behind the hardline stance of the Lee administration on North Korea. The Lee government seemed more interested in a post-North Korea policy, not a North Korea policy.

If the new South Korean government under Park Geun-hye is operating under a similar assumption of an impending North Korean collapse, either natural or induced, this will only lead to undesirable policy consequences. The prediction of the collapse of North Korea is unfounded and erroneous. North Korea has impressively weathered all those years of “multiple economic stresses” well and does not show any sign of regime breakdown. North Korea will not collapse, and it is therefore a serious policy error to operate under the misleading assumption that the collapse of North Korea is forthcoming. Also, after all, the North’s sudden collapse is not desirable for South Korea – it will be a catastrophic disaster.

Rather than crafting a North Korea policy under the wishful, if not delusional, thinking of the collapse of North Korea, therefore, both South Korea and the United States should accept the enduring existence of North Korea as a given and then proceed to determine the best ways to facilitate political change in North Korea. The most prudent course of action is to continue and deepen the policy of engagement. Only engagement and incremental incorporation of the North Korean economy into the global economy can provide the best chance of socioeconomic development in the country, which can promote the growth of civil society and can generate elite split as economic reform deepens. Also, only engagement can increase North Korea’s dependency on and thus vulnerability to various international political and economic pressures. Engagement, pursuing (Willy) Brandtian (or Egon Bahrian) “Change through Rapprochement (Wandel durch Annäherung),” is the best way to possibly bring about change in North Korea. Mobilizing all diplomatic resources to engage North Korea and to induce it to open and reform its economy is the best method of increasing the chance of political change in the longest totalitarian regime in modern history.

References


