



A PAPER SERIES

# UNDERSTANDING NORTH KOREA

## Tightening the Screws:

The Origins and Dynamics of Kim Jong Un's Clampdown on “Capitalist Tendencies”

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*This paper reflects the views of the author alone and not those of the National Committee on North Korea, the Wilson Center, or any other organizations.*

## Introduction

North Korea is one of the harshest totalitarian dictatorships in the world. It is, however, not a static society. Dynamics of oppression have waxed and waned throughout the country's history. The current leader, Kim Jong Un, has made it a priority to strengthen surveillance and social control, and launched an intense crackdown against foreign, "capitalist" culture in the country around one year ago. This runs counter to what many believed—or perhaps, rather, hoped for—as Kim ascended to replace his father, Kim Jong Il, in late 2011. This paper explores the origins and dynamics of the current crackdown as well as the risks it carries for the regime.

Because of Kim's relatively young age and education in western Europe, many believed that he might institute systemic social and economic reforms and, in the long run, let up on social control. During the two decades before Kim took over, from the mid-1990s, the state lost much of its capacity to govern the economy, challenging its ability to enforce the blockade against information and culture from the outside world.<sup>1</sup> This also sparked trading and smuggling across the border with China, leading to the influx of movies, music, tv-shows, and other culture from the outside world, mainly North Korea's arch enemy South Korea. In a 2012 study surveying North Korean refugees in South Korea, nearly half of those interviewed had watched foreign DVDs while living in North Korea.<sup>2</sup>

By the time Kim Jong Un came to power, these developments had seemingly gone too far to roll back. For example, an overwhelming share of the population are active, either as consumers or sellers (often both), in the country's markets. According to one study from 2013, over 36% of North Koreans surveyed in South Korea said that their main source of food while in North Korea was market trade.<sup>3</sup> The market system has given rise to networks among traders and other individuals working within it, who collaborate and communicate with each other outside the frameworks of the state, putting in place a potential building block for civil society in the long run.<sup>4</sup>

Some preliminary signs, moreover, did suggest that Kim might loosen up state controls over society. In 2012 during his first public speech after coming to power, Kim promised that people would "never have to tighten their belts again," appearing to suggest that economic

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<sup>1</sup> For excellent accounts of this process, see Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, *Famine in North Korea: Markets, Aid, and Reform* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2009); Nick Eberstadt, *The North Korean Economy: Between Crisis and Catastrophe* (New Brunswick, NJ; London: Transaction Publishers, 2009); T'ae-söp Lee, *Pukhanŭi Kyöngje Wigiwa Ch'eje Pyönhwa* (Seoul, Republic of Korea: Sönin, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Nat Kretchun and Jane Kim, "A Quiet Opening: North Koreans in a Changing Media Environment," report published by InterMedia, May 2012, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Institute for Peace and Unification Studies (IPUS), "Pukhan sahoe pyöndong 2017 [Changes in North Korean Society, 2017]" Research Report, (Seoul, Republic of Korea: Institute for Peace and Unification Studies, 2017), p. 85.

<sup>4</sup> For an excellent analysis of these changes and the future prospects they hold, see Justin V. Hastings, Daniel Wertz, and Andrew Yeo, "Market Activities and the Building Blocks for Civil Society in North Korea," report published by the National Committee on North Korea, February 2021.

liberalization might be on the horizon.<sup>5</sup> Kim, moreover, dedicated significant resources to building facilities such as amusement parks, a ski resort, and refurbishing entire neighborhoods in Pyongyang, communicating that under his rule everyday life North Korea was not merely to be survived but even enjoyed.

Close to ten years after Kim's ascent to power, reports abound from inside North Korea of intense crackdowns against smuggling of foreign media, illegal cell phones, border trade, and private market activity. At the Eight Party Congress in early 2021, Kim launched a large-scale campaign against foreign, capitalist influences. A law was enacted shortly after the congress levelling severe punishments, such as forced labor in the country's Gulag system and death penalty for severe offenders, against those who distribute or consume South Korean dramas or other foreign culture and even against using South Korean accents and dressing in ways suggestive of South Korean fashion.

What explains this development? This essay argues that Kim has sought from the beginning of his tenure to restore the state's capacity to govern and exercise totalitarian control. North Korea's particularly difficult economic situation during the Covid-19 border shutdown may explain the timing of the present campaign. At the same time, it was not launched suddenly and continues a pattern from Kim's first years in power. Kim and his advisors may seek to return to a rule more closely resembling that of Kim's grandfather, Kim Il Sung, who constructed the bedrock of North Korea's totalitarian system.<sup>6</sup>

Implementing and executing the campaign is likely challenging for the regime. The state likely has limited and often unreliable data about the extent of foreign, capitalist cultural penetration given that people take great care to hide such cultural consumption from the authorities. Some reports suggest that the North Korean regime is relying increasingly on technological surveillance equipment, although human intelligence remains the main method for surveillance and social control in the country.<sup>7</sup> The case of China's increasing reliance on modern technology for surveillance shows that even though capacity to gather information about the population may expand massively, organizing this information in a usable manner, legible to government agencies, remains hugely difficult.<sup>8</sup> Thus, even if the North Korean state

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<sup>5</sup> Choe Sang-hun, "North Korean Leader Stresses Need for Strong Military," *The New York Times*, April 15, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of this system, see Benjamin Katzeff Silberstein, *When Sherlock Holmes Left Pyongyang: Surveillance and Social Control in North Korea, 1954–2019*, doctoral dissertation in history, University of Pennsylvania, August 2021.

<sup>7</sup> For North Korea's investments in modern surveillance technology, see Benjamin Katzeff Silberstein, "How High-Tech Can Boost Regime Stability in North Korea," *Orbis* 64, no. 4 (January 1, 2020): 589–98. For an overview of the most important facets of social control in North Korea, see, for example, An Hui-ch'ang, *Pukhan'ui T'ongch'i Ch'eje: Chibae Kujowa Sahoe T'ongje* (Seoul, Republic of Korea: Myŏngin Munhwasa, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Huirong Chen and Sheena Chestnut Greitens, "Information capacity and social order: The local politics of information integration in China," *Governance* (2021): 1–27.

becomes more efficient and competent in gathering data about its citizens, turning it into information that the state can act upon will remain challenging.

The tightening of social controls predates the Covid-19 pandemic and the harsh sanctions against the country in 2016–2018. However, these circumstances have exacerbated the state's imperative to contain foreign influences and capitalist social trends since the dire economic situation has increased the state's anxiety about public discontent. Moreover, these developments may have lent hardliners within the regime more clout and leeway, enabling them to push policies in a conservative direction. Many countries have used the pandemic as a rationale to clamp down on political opposition and North Korea is part of this global trend.<sup>9</sup>

The crackdown against foreign culture, moreover, is one part of a larger campaign to strengthen regime control. Like Xi Jinping in China, Kim Jong Un has proclaimed corruption to be a central social challenge. Campaigns such as these, however, tend to double as political purges as people with stable political positions and connections are often overlooked, while real or potential political enemies are targeted disproportionately.<sup>10</sup> Thus, even campaigns with strong political backing from the leader often take political interests into consideration. Those with the right positions, contacts, and resources can often escape trouble.

The campaign may pose medium- to long-term risks for the regime. The parallel clampdown on private economic activity is most precarious, but tightened control over information and cultural consumption also carries risks. Particularly under Kim Jong Un, the state has explicitly sought to improve the quality of state-sanctioned culture and entertainment to provide more appealing alternatives to those smuggled in from abroad.<sup>11</sup> Thus far, however, little suggests that it has succeeded. Although there are few (if any) known instances of public expressions of discontent against the government's suppression of foreign culture and entertainment, one cannot rule out that these might occur in the future, particularly at a time of worsening economic conditions in the country.

## Social Control in North Korea: A Brief Background

To understand how the campaign may be unfolding in practice, it is useful to take a step back and look at the outlines of country's surveillance system. The system for social control is based on coercive institutions such as the secret, political police (Ministry for State Security) and a

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<sup>9</sup> Donald Grasse, Melissa Pavlik, Hilary Matfess, and Travis Curtice, 2021. "Opportunistic Repression: Patterns of civilian targeting by the state in response to COVID-19." *International Security* (forthcoming).

<sup>10</sup> For an informative account of these dynamics, see Desmond Shum, *Red Roulette: an Insider's Story of Wealth, Power, Corruption* (New York, NY: Scribner, 2021).

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin Katzeff Silberstein, "Kim Jong Un's Congress Report: More Economic and Social Controls on the Horizon," *38 North*, February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2021, <https://www.38north.org/2021/02/kim-jong-uns-congress-report-more-economic-and-social-controls-on-the-horizon/>.

theoretically more benign host of social organizations that effectively place every citizen under state control for much of their daily life. This is known in North Korean parlance as “the organizational life”. In theory, each North Korean is required to belong to a so-called “mass organization,” which gathers school children and youth, students, workers, peasants, and women into state-controlled organizations, and attend regular meetings and political study sessions.<sup>12</sup> Both in schools and at workplaces, political secretaries and teachers monitor the political attitudes of students and workers. These assessments are recorded in the personal files of each citizen that the government holds.<sup>13</sup>

Another crucial institution is the *inminban* or “people’s unit” system. Each unit typically organizes ten to twenty families based on the neighborhood in which they live, headed by an *inminbanjang*—or “people’s unit head”—which keeps in regular contact with the political police and regular police authorities (Ministry of Public Security). The *inminbanjang* is responsible for reporting suspicious behavior and political infractions to the authorities and conducts regular house searches together with the authorities for smuggled goods and illegal materials such as foreign media and culture.<sup>14</sup> Not least, the *inminban* is also responsible for mobilizing people for collective works such as construction projects or farm labor—outside of people’s ordinary work assignments—whenever required.

The famine of the 1990s weakened the system, although precisely to what extent remains unclear. As the state ceased to supply food rations to the population, it could not realistically enforce the ban on private economic activity, leading authorities to turn a blind eye to private market trade and, to some extent, cross-border smuggling. Border guards, security officials, and political cadres became susceptible to corruption as the state could no longer reward them as it used to. As the role of the state in providing for the people drastically shrank or disappeared, the role of mass organizations and people’s units also diminished with much of the public either bribing their way out of attending the mandatory meetings or simply not showing up without much consequence.<sup>15</sup> According to one study, Kim Jong Un has sought to strengthen systems such as the *inminban* by introducing and strengthening economic incentives for *inminbanjang* and has made the position of *inminbanjang* a full-time task with a state wage similar to a regular worker. During many periods in North Korea’s history (and certainly in the 1990s), the role of *inminbanjang* did not come with significant financial compensation.<sup>16</sup> According to the same study, the state has set up 24-hour guard booths at the

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<sup>12</sup> For an overview of this system, see Andrei Lankov, In-ok Kwak, and Choong-Bin Cho, “The Organizational Life: Daily Surveillance and Daily Resistance in North Korea,” *Journal of East Asian Studies* 12, no. 2 (2012): 193–214.

<sup>13</sup> Several North Koreans, some of which have worked with maintaining these records on the local level, have explained the process to the present author.

<sup>14</sup> For an overview of this system, see Ch’ae Kyōng-hūi. “Pukhan 'Inminban'e Kwanhan Yōn'gu : Inminbanūi Chojik, Yōkhal, Kinūngūl Chungsimūro.” MA thesis, Pukhan Daehagwōn Daehakkyo, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> All of this has naturally varied over time and between regions. Such stories abound in the literature about the famine, and several North Koreans have recounted this change to the present author in previous interviews.

<sup>16</sup> Pae Yōng-ae, “Kim Jōng-ūn sidaeūi inminbane kwanhan yōn'gu” *T'ongiljōngch'aegyōn'gu* 29, no.2 (2020): 1-28.

entrances to inminban districts to check people's identification cards and monitor who enters and leaves the area and increased the frequency of house inspections.<sup>17</sup> Media organizations with sources inside North Korea have reported similar details about the state working to strengthen the authority and compensation of inminbanjang.<sup>18</sup>

One feature that distinguishes North Korea from other totalitarian systems in past and present is the extent to which power is centered around the country's leader.<sup>19</sup> Particularly after the 1960s, the leader and the state became increasingly synonymous. All security organs are, first and foremost, responsible for rooting out any threats against the supreme leader.<sup>20</sup> This has likely enforced the stability of the system by decreasing the potential for different interest groups vying for power of the security apparatus.

It is central to grasp precisely why the regime harbors such anxiety about foreign culture. The dangers of foreign culture to a regime such as North Korea are difficult, if not impossible, to estimate fully. Once foreign culture has entered an autocratic or totalitarian society, its influence can be to curtail and near impossible to control. For example, the recent popularity of South Korean culture around the globe has increased global interest in and appreciation for South Korea itself.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the North Korean government's fears might be well placed particularly when it comes to South Korean culture. As Dafna Zur puts it, "Korean dramas and K-pop bands offer visions of cosmopolitan chic, rags-to-riches fantasies, cross-class romance, gender-bending narratives, and stories about popular uprising."<sup>22</sup>

## Kim Jong Un's Renewed Emphasis on Social Control

Since coming to power in late 2011, Kim Jong Un has prioritized strengthening the security apparatus and tightening social control. At the Eighth Party Congress, Kim delivered a report

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<sup>17</sup> Pae, "Kim Jǒng-ŭn sidaeŭi..", 17–18. It is unclear how this works in practice since far from all inminban are made up of apartment buildings or other courted-off zones that can be easily monitored.

<sup>18</sup> Kang Ji-Won, "<Inside N. Korea > Scariest than the police...Housewives turned "people's units" leaders are now becoming more powerful as key resources used by N. Korea to control its population," *Rimjingang*, April 28, 2022, accessed May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022, <https://www.asiapress.org/rimjin-gang/2022/04/society-economy/housewives/>.

<sup>19</sup> For more on this, see Fyodor Tertitskiy, "1967: Transition to Absolute Autocracy in North Korea," in *Change and Continuity in North Korean Politics*, ed. Adam Cathcart, Christopher Green, and Steven Denney (London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 82–94.

<sup>20</sup> An Hŭi-ch'ang, *Pukhanŭi T'ongch'i Ch'eje: Chibae Kujowa Sahoe T'ongje* (Seoul, Republic of Korea: Myŏngin Munhwasa, 2016), 311.

<sup>21</sup> For an analysis of the North Korean government's fears of South Korean culture, see Dafna Zur, "North Korean Fears of South Korean Culture," *The Peninsula*, September 22, 2021, <https://keia.org/the-peninsula/north-korean-fears-of-south-korean-culture/>.

<sup>22</sup> Zur, "North Korean Fears...".

underscoring the “need for a firm political climate,” “the struggle for eliminating all kinds of anti-people factors,” and other expressions.<sup>23</sup>

Though the Party Congress highlighted the struggle against political and social disobedience, the priority of such rhetoric goes back to the early days of Kim’s tenure. For example, in 2014, Kim gave a speech at a meeting for “ideology officials,” most likely propaganda cadres, accusing “imperialists” of infiltrating “corrupt reactionary ideology and culture” into the country, reaching “young people and service personnel” in particular. He also called for “[...] putting up ‘mosquito net’ double and treble to prevent the viruses of capitalist ideology which the enemy is persistently attempting to spread from infiltrating across our border.”<sup>24</sup>

Survey data from North Korean refugees in South Korea confirm the trend of stronger surveillance and control under Kim. In one survey from 2017, the majority of respondents said it had become more dangerous to watch dramas from South Korea and other foreign countries under Kim Jong Un. Not a single individual surveyed believed it had become less dangerous.<sup>25</sup> One North Korean interviewed by *Daily NK*, a news site based in South Korea with sources inside North Korea, said in early 2018 that “[i]t used to be that you just needed money to watch South Korean dramas, but that’s no longer the case. Now only Ministry of State Security (MSS) officials or agents can openly watch them, while ordinary people have to find secretive methods to view them.”<sup>26</sup> Moreover, throughout Kim’s tenure, defections to South Korea have dropped drastically in large part as a result of strengthened border controls, dropping by a record 78% in 2020 compared to the year before.<sup>27</sup>

Nonetheless, during the past year, the government has cracked down on foreign culture with renewed strength. In December 2020, the Presidium of the Supreme People’s Assembly, North Korea’s rubber-stamp parliament, adopted a new law against “reactionary thought.” The law stipulates that anyone caught watching or possessing culture from South Korea can be sentenced to five to fifteen years in a labor camp. Famously, the law also punishes people for speaking in a South Korean accent or singing in a South Korean “style.” Possession of pornographic or “superstitious” (religious) materials is to be punished with fifteen years of correctional labor. The law also punishes a broad range of people other than the direct offender, such as those who have known about the existence of culture from Japan, South Korea, or the

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<sup>23</sup> “Great Programme for Struggle Leading Korean-style Socialist Construction to Fresh Victory: On Report Made by Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un at Eighth Congress of WPK,” *Korean Central News Agency*, January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

<sup>24</sup> “Speech of Kim Jong Un at Conference of Ideological Workers,” *Korean Central News Agency*, February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2014.

<sup>25</sup> Nat Kretchun, Catherine Lee and Seamus Tuohy, *Compromising Connectivity: Information Dynamics Between the State and Society in a Digitizing North Korea* (Washington, D.C.: InterMedia, 2017).

<sup>26</sup> “N. Koreans search for alternatives amid S. Korean media crackdown,” *Daily NK*, March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2018, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-koreans-search-for-alternati/>.

<sup>27</sup> Colin Zwirko, “North Korean defectors arriving in the South drop by 78% in 2020 — a record low,” *NK News*, January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2021, <https://www.nknews.org/2021/01/north-korean-defectors-arriving-in-the-south-drop-by-78-in-2020-a-record-low/>.

United States in their vicinity but fail to report it to the authorities, and officials in customs and other institutions responsible for keeping such materials out because they failed in their duties. Parents of children who break the law are also reprimanded for not fostering them properly.<sup>28</sup>

The crackdown has grown in intensity over time. In mid-June 2021, a regime task force against “anti-socialist behavior” consisting of security officials and other functionaries restarted its activities in the country, having first operated primarily in the border region to China from early January.<sup>29</sup> News reports based on sources inside North Korea also suggest that punishments are often more severe than the law mandates. Families of transgressors have, reportedly, in several instances been sent to prison camps together with the offender, a practice that used to be standard for political criminals but in practice has decreased in recent years. In many instances, moreover, transgressors have reportedly been sent to political prison camps with harsher conditions than the labor camps mandated by the law.<sup>30</sup>

At the same time, the state appears to be refurbishing and perhaps expanding the country’s labor and prison camps. A contributing factor since the beginning of 2020 has been the incarceration of people for violating Covid-19 restrictions, but it is not the main cause. Around the time of the Eighth Party Congress, when the state ordered a renewed large-scale crackdown on “anti-socialist and non-socialist phenomena,” *Daily NK* reported that the government planned to expand the number of prison camps to house offenders rounded up in the crackdown and to clear land for new mining projects where prisoners will work. In late September, *Daily NK* reported that a new camp for political prisoners was constructed in the country’s northeast and the third political prison camp constructed in 2020 and early 2021. All in all, these facilities can reportedly hold more than 20,000 inmates.<sup>31</sup> There are reasons to be skeptical about these reports. While there is irrefutable evidence that the regime has refurbished and expanded several camps over the last few years, satellite imagery data does not currently confirm that new camps have been constructed.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Seulkee Jang, “Exclusive: Daily NK obtains materials explaining specifics of new “anti-reactionary thought” law,” *Daily NK*, January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2021, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/exclusive-daily-nk-obtains-materials-explaining-specifics-new-anti-reactionary-thought-law/>.

<sup>29</sup> Kim Yoo Jin, “North Korea ramps up crackdowns on “non-socialist and anti-socialist behavior” in border region,” *Daily NK*, June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2021, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-ramps-up-crackdowns-non-socialist-anti-socialist-behavior-border-region/>.

<sup>30</sup> Mun Dong Hui, “Violators of N. Korea’s anti-reactionary thought law face punishment along with their families,” *Daily NK*, September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2021, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/violators-north-korea-anti-reactionary-thought-law-punishment-families/>.

<sup>31</sup> Mun Dong Hui, “New prison camp in N. Pyongan Province is a political prison camp,” *Daily NK*, September 27<sup>th</sup>, 2021, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/new-prison-camp-north-pyongan-province-political-prison-camp/>.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Joseph Bermudez Jr., Greg Scarlatou, Amanda Mortwedt Oh, and Rosa Parks, “North Korea’s Long-term Prison-Labor Facility Kyo-hwa-so No. 8, Sŭngho-ri (승호리) – Update,” Report by the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, July 22, 2021; Joseph Bermudez Jr., Greg Scarlatou, Amanda Mortwedt Oh, and Rosa Parks, “North Korea’s Long-term Prison-Labor Facility at Sŏnhwa-dong (선화동) – Update,” Report by the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, August 26, 2021.

Some camps were closed down in the past few years due to increased scrutiny by the international community, but this trend appears to be reversing.<sup>33</sup> Satellite imagery data thus far does not show that any significant expansion has taken place of existing camps, but confirms that the state continues to refurbish and maintain existing camps, ensuring their vital function in the punitive system as well as the economy, with most of them harboring factories, farms, and other production facilities where prisoners work.<sup>34</sup>

Despite the emphasis in the campaign on rooting out foreign culture and trends, expressions such as “capitalist tendencies” and “reactionary ideology” encompass a very broad range of activities and should be seen as umbrella terms for any behavior against the goals of the state. As in other totalitarian dictatorships in past and present, “national security” also serves as a blanket term for state interests more broadly. Foreign culture may be one of the main threats perceived by the regime, but it is far from the only one. The campaign targets any tendencies that may threaten state control, such as corruption, private economic activity of a form or scale that the state perceives as threatening to its hegemony, and, not least, violations of Covid-19 regulations. As noted, those breaking Covid-19-related regulations reportedly make up a substantial (though it is unclear how large) proportion of those currently being sent to prison camps. The government regards Covid-19 as a national security threat. It only let up on its tight closure of the border to China in early 2022, after two years, and continues to mandate rigorous, time-consuming inspections of all goods that enter the country.<sup>35</sup>

The attempts by the state to reassert control over the economy, also emphasized at the Eighth Party Congress, should also be seen partially in this light. Over the past year, Pyongyang has clearly stated its ambition to increase the state’s influence over the sectors of the economy where private and semi-private business has expanded and, in some cases, come to dominate.<sup>36</sup> The government wants to regularize and increase its revenues from the market sector, often poorly regulated (if at all) with individual government officials reaping much larger benefits than the state itself. To a significant extent, this development is driven by the country’s already

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<sup>33</sup> Mun Dong Hui, “North Korea orders expansion of political prison camp system,” *Daily NK*, February 19<sup>th</sup>, 2021, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-orders-expansion-political-prison-camp-system/>.

<sup>34</sup> The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea has covered these developments using satellite imagery to monitor the state of these camps. See, for example, Joseph S. Bermudez Jr, Greg Scarlatoiu, Amanda Mortwedt Oh, and Rosa Parks-Tokola, “North Korea’s Political Prison Camp, *Kwan-li-so* No. 25, Updated 3,” report published by the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Benjamin Katzeff Silberstein, “New data: NK-China trade after the Covid border closure,” *North Korean Economy Watch*, March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022, accessed May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022, <http://www.nkeconwatch.com/2022/03/24/new-data-nk-china-trade-after-the-covid-border-closure/>. For more on the impact of Covid-19 on the North Korean economy see, for example, Benjamin Katzeff Silberstein, “The North Korean Economy: Coronavirus Measures Causing Economic Anxiety,” *38 North*, March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020, <https://www.38north.org/2020/03/bkatzeffsilberstein032720/>; Hyonhee Shin, “N. Korea’s trade with China plunges 80% as Covid-19 lockdown bites,” *Reuters*, January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/nkoreas-trade-with-china-plunges-80-covid-19-lockdown-bites-2021-01-19/>.

<sup>36</sup> For more on this, see, for example, Katzeff Silberstein, “Kim Jong Un’s Congress Report: More Economic and Social Controls on the Horizon,”; Ruediger Frank, “Key Results of the Eight Party Congress in North Korea (Part 1 of 2),” *38 North*, January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2021, <https://www.38north.org/2021/01/key-results-of-the-eighth-party-congress-in-north-korea-part-1-of-2/>.

dire economic situation, which has arguably turned into a crisis during the Covid-19 border lockdown. However, social control itself is also a crucial motive. When individuals amass significant economic resources, they become potential threats to government power. The primary example of this is Jang Song-taek, Kim Jong Un's uncle, whom he had executed in late 2013. Jang had amassed enough wealth—much of it through trade with China—to create a small power sphere of his own through his patronage networks.<sup>37</sup> One of the goals of increasing state control over the economy is to ensure control over society and prevent power and social influence from falling into the hands of any individual other than Kim Jong Un.

## Conclusion and Outlook

This essay has examined Kim Jong Un's drive for strengthened social control. Although the campaign has recently escalated considerably after the Eighth Party Congress in early 2021, it began much earlier. The development may be partially cyclical. The famine of the 1990s undermined the state's ability to enforce North Korea's rigorously totalitarian model. One can imagine that Kim Jong Un was frustrated with what he saw when he came to power in late 2011: a system whose stability rests on its ability to direct both social dynamics and the economy, and to keep foreign influences out, but a state whose ability to do so had been badly fractured. Kim's drive to strengthen social control is, in a sense, an attempt to restore the state's ability to govern in the totalitarian manner it is designed for.

This suggests something crucial about the North Korean regime's threat perceptions. It met the Covid-19 pandemic by effectively sealing the northern border to China against trade and travel for two full years, likely well-aware of the devastating economic effects this would have. The government was prepared to shoulder this heightened risk of socio-political instability, confident that it could weather an economic crisis as it did through the 1990s. By contrast, the crackdown against "capitalist influences" indicates that it regards foreign culture as a potentially bigger threat to social stability than economic devastation.

Will the campaign succeed? This is, on the one hand, far from certain. The use of state-sanctioned cell phones provides an illustrative example. Although these phones come with pre-installed surveillance features and block unsanctioned information, some North Koreans appear to be learning how to disable these controls.<sup>38</sup> Social relations, moreover, are now structured not only by politics, but also by economic relations often outside of state control.<sup>39</sup> Since the development of the market economy began, the state has had to back down from

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<sup>37</sup> Ra Jong-il, *Inside North Korea's Theocracy: The Rise and Sudden Fall of Jang Song-thaek* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2019).

<sup>38</sup> Andy Greenberg, "North Koreans Are Jailbreaking Phones to Access Forbidden Media," *Wired*, April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2022, <https://www.wired.com/story/north-korean-phone-jailbreakers/>

<sup>39</sup> See Hastings *et al*, "Market Activities and the Building Blocks for Civil Society in North Korea."

major policy decisions—an historical rarity in North Korea—in the face of popular opposition. The state can no longer, in other words, make up the rules and simply expect the public to conform. Given that consumption of foreign culture and other phenomena the state characterizes as “capitalist tendencies” are now widespread, the same logic may hold true for social control overall. This is particularly true for the present moment, when living conditions are deteriorating, despite Kim Jong Un’s early promises of the opposite.

On the other hand, virtually all instances of public discontent in post-famine North Korea have come when the state has clamped down on aspects of people’s livelihoods. The aspects of the campaign directed at “capitalist tendencies” such as corruption—often virtually necessary for economic activity—and violations of Covid-19 restrictions, particularly concerning freedom of movement inside the country, may face some level of popular pushback. It is, however, another thing entirely to protest the clampdown on foreign culture and information. Watching foreign TV dramas and listening to South Korean music may be important for the leisure of millions of North Koreans, but they are not foundational for their survival. The state may never succeed in rooting out such phenomena entirely given how widespread they are, but this part of the drive for strengthened social control may end up being the most successful one.

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