Human Rights Atrocities in North Korea

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Abstract

For decades, the people of North Korea have been subjected to brutal and surreal human rights violations. In terms of civil rights, the state places heavy restrictions on freedom of association and freedom of religion, while political freedoms and freedom of speech are nonexistent. Forced disappearances are commonplace, and the North Korean judicial system is harsh and subjective, prosecuting behaviors that are not always considered criminal to the international community. Under the rule of Kim Jong II, two types of prison camps have emerged, both inflicting unimaginable atrocities. Despite international awareness, many countries are hesitant to interfere; instead they prefer to maintain diplomatic relations. This paper examines North Korea as a remaining representative of totalitarian-style government, outlining two distinct systems of incarceration and the international response to the crimes North Korea inflicts against its people. Further, this paper strives to provide a framework for considering the future of North Korea.

Human rights were introduced in North Korea in 1945 but have been limited by economic strain, political totalitarianism, and a focus on nuclear warfare. The North Korean economy has faced challenges due to the strict economic markets influenced by centrally controlled socialism. This prompted and continues to augment famine throughout the state. Unfortunately, the control of Kim Jong II does not show promise of progress in rebuilding economic infrastructure. Thus, the people will continue to suffer on account of the elementary market system (Kongdan & Hassig, 2010).
The government in North Korea is a bureaucracy, with one man carrying unprecedented power over the military and the government. After he came to power, Kim Jong II implemented “military-first politics”, which would constrain state actions. Consequently, the social system created would organize the people “from cradle to the grave” with a focus on propaganda and fear tactics (McEachern, 2008). Additionally, the commitment to building a strong nuclear warfare program has remained a top priority for North Korean officials. In spite of their numerous agreements to abandon the program, in 2006 they admitted that complete removal of the program was impossible. Unfortunately, their decision to advance in nuclear development also denied them economic compensation from international representatives (Kongdan & Hassig, 2010).

Together, these three components are causes of discomfort and irritability within North Korea. The people’s criticisms of the regime conflict with the totalitarian state ideology. The government, in an attempt to eradicate disobedience and unconformity, has implemented inhumane forms of incarceration. These prison camps not only defy human rights policies in their persecution, but also in their treatment of prisoners and in their use of indefinite sentencing.

**Totalitarian State**

Common characteristics of totalitarian states that are representative of North Korea include withholding information, heavy surveillance, and control over all facets of daily life. Because the regime in North Korea is dependent on creating the facade of protecting its people, monopolizing information is essential to the success of the regime. Thus, the government has criminalized the use of tunable radio, restricted the availability of foreign publications, and North Korea remains the only country without public Internet access. These regulations are essential to securing the illusion of a happy and prosperous country. Further, traveling beyond one’s town requires travel permits, and overnight guests require registration with the authorities. The exchange of information threatens the stability of North Korea,
thus the need to regulate and supervise travel; when information is lacking, isolationism allows totalitarianism to strive. Daily life is affected not only in information and travel, but also in the management of occupation. Freedoms such as the changing of jobs requires government mandate in totalitarian states. Many of the people of North Korea are oblivious to this control. Because of the intense propaganda by the North Korean government, its people are unaware that their situation is different than anywhere else. In fact, North Koreans are taught to believe that their situation is more promising than other regions; they are taught that they live in paradise. Unfortunately for the North Korean government, conditions have improved for the people and criticism against the regime is growing. Today, bribes are typical between North Koreans and underpaid police officials who are willing to overlook previously prohibited activities. This allows for the transfer of information and establishes a newfound independence. Famine has also prompted the opening of the black market, which has accounted for the greater majority of household incomes; the people no longer rely solely on rationing systems (Lankov, 2009).

The Prison Camp System

Two types of prison camps have been established in North Korea, partly in response to criticisms against the government: kwan-li-so, penal labor colonies, and kyo-hwa-so, prison labor facilities. There is also a separate form of brutal incarceration reserved for those North Koreans who are repatriated from China.

First, kwan-li-so prison camps are characterized by large numbers of deaths caused from hard labor and starvation. Typically, those persecuted for political wrongdoings are incarcerated in this style of prison camp. Persecution in kwan-li-so does not require any form of judicial process, and up to three generations of the prisoners’ families can be banished alongside them. Sentences within the kwan-li-so entail various forms of slave labor, including farming and mining. Described as colonies, kwan-li-so are
sprawling encampments that enclose separate villages for different categories of prisoners. These encampments can stretch for up to 20 miles in any direction and divide the families of the presumed political offenders from the imprisoned relative. According to Liang-Fenton (2007), there are between 5,000 and 50,000 prisoners per *kwan-li-so*, including both the perceived wrongdoers and their families. The prisoners remain under permanent brutal incarceration for life sentences of extremely hard labor; North Korea denies the existence of *kwan-li-so* (Liang-Fenton, 2007).

Second, *kyo-hwa-so* are smaller, prison-like institutions where punishment is still extremely brutal. *Kyo-hwa-so* differs from the former style of imprisonment in that there is a form of judicial process in the persecution of the prisoners and they receive a fixed incarceration period. Unfortunately, state authorities control this judicial process and most of the prisoners do not expect to reach their sentence terms. Prisoners experience food starvation and hard labor under dangerous conditions, making fatality extremely common. Convictions are sometimes for internationally recognized crimes, yet some prisoners are still convicted for “political crimes” and their criminalization is not in agreement with international norms. An example provided by Liang-Fenton (2007) describes a woman convicted for singing a South Korean pop song – an act considered to be disturbing the socialist order. In an effort to maintain totalitarian control, acts that defy the socialist norms are considered to be political crimes, and are thus prosecuted. While states have the right to withhold criminals from certain liberties, depriving them of their right to food and working them to death should not be within their jurisdiction.

Liang-Fenton (2007) outlines three conditions that distinguish North Korean prison camps from other international methods of punishment and highlight the inhumanity that is relevant in all of the North Korean life. Foremost, a person can be put into prison camps for “crimes” that would not be considered punishable by most of the international community, such as singing pop songs in private. Second, there is the feature of “collective responsibility” (or “guilt-by-association”) where up to three generations can be punished alongside the offending political prisoner. Officials are not required to
inform those being arrested of who in their relation is being punished, nor details of the crime. Finally, presumed offenders are often simply picked up and tortured to “confess” to their crimes (Liang-Fenton, 2007). Unfortunately, both styles of incarceration involve hard labor under inhumane and brutal working conditions. Food starvation is key to forcing cooperation, which causes fatalities prior to sentence completion. Gulags in North Korea are representative of modern day concentration camps; they are used to induce fear in the people.

**International Law**

North Korea has signed on to at least four international human rights agreements, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Civil Rights, (ICESCR), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. North Korea has not only signed on, but until recently has continuously offered reports of the current state of the country in regards to human rights violations. North Korea has made some efforts to improve the quality of life for its people; in the early 2000s, it met with other international communities to discuss human rights and accept suggestions on how to improve and develop the country. Unfortunately, there is a discrepancy between the principles of North Korean ideology and what is accepted as human rights norms in the international community. North Korean government officials refuse to believe that the restrictions they place on their people are incongruent with the norm. In fact, they suggest that control is the most effective way to run a functioning country; they do not understand how other nations function without it. Further, it has intermittently allowed non-governmental human rights organizations to enter its borders (Suh, 2007).

While improvements have been made in North Korea, there have been no significant changes. North Korea continues to ignore revisions provided to them by neighboring countries and the United Nations. North Koreans still face harsh famine and denial of basic human rights, such as the right to life,
protection by law, to vote, and women’s rights, all which have been relatively granted in other countries. The totalitarian government prospers from these kinds of restrictions; it uses propaganda and fear to establish strict policy in favor of the government. North Korean government needs its people to rely on their protection, which the people believe they are receiving in exchange for their conformity. As people rebel against the government, North Korean officials believe they have no other choice but to be strict with their punishment. Recently, knowledge of these prisons has to come to light in the international community; the *White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea 2006*, for instance, charges the North Korean government with illegal confinement, torture, and inhumane treatment in detention centers (Suh, 2007).

Ultimately, the human rights situation in North Korea can be seen in two different ways: through the violations against the ICPR or through the violations against the ICESCR. Critics of the former would expose the violations in North Korea, such as prison camps and restrictions on religious freedoms. Those for the latter would criticize the lack of international foreign aid to improve the situation and encourage development. Regardless, both groups of critics agree that that the current state of North Korea is in urgent need of change.

**International Response**

International responses to the atrocities in North Korea have been inconsistent. China and South Korea receive an influx of defectors every year, though the number is insignificant compared to those suffering through the violations. China presents an ideal escape for North Koreans geographically; however, the Chinese government has yet to make a public statement on its opinion of North Korean defectors. The Northern border of North Korea shared with Russia is only ten percent of the total borderline, making the chances of entering China more promising. North Korea is aware of the movement from its region into China, and has since requested that China view defectors as criminals.
Thus, China does not identify North Korean defectors as refugees. Instead, they consider them illegal immigrants who do not have the right to legal protection. Further, China has regarded these defectors as nuisances to their own social order; defectors lack documentation, thus have no choice but to engage in criminal activity in order to survive. In some recent cases, China has been kinder to defectors, often overlooking their presence unless it becomes problematic. According to Ho Ko et al. (2004), in the early 2000’s China became more flexible and only repatriated those with criminal backgrounds. Yet that it frequently not the case, with China regularly returning defectors to North Korea in recent years.

South Korea also presents an escape for North Korean defectors, though barbed wire and land mines make success more difficult. While South Korea sympathizes with the underdevelopment of North Korea, it struggles to justify aid due to fear that their prosperity could be threatened. In order to help reconstruct the North, South Korea would have to forfeit nearly the entirety of its hard earned success. North Korea has taken a hard line with South Korea as well, demanding that civic organizations not provide food or shelter for those fleeing the country (Ho Ko, 2004). In spite of their hesitance to interfere with North Korean politics, the South has assumed responsibility for feeding much of the North Korean population. According to Lankov (2008), Seoul may be essentially contributing as much as 40-50 percent of the calories consumed by the average North Korean.

While the United States is eager to relieve North Koreans of their agony within the totalitarian state, politics over nuclear weaponry development has put a halt to economic aid. The United States continues to permit the participation of non-government organizations involved in North Korea, as well as promotes freedom of information and encourages change (Wolman, 2013). Their economic support, however, has been restricted due to political strife. The government refuses economic aid as long as the North Korean government continues to develop nuclear weaponry. Much debate has since risen about the international responsibility to employ United Nations mechanisms on North Korea, particularly from highly influential countries like the United States (Wolman, 2013).
North Korean defectors have to be incredibly aware of the consequences of fleeing the state. Often times, they are punished and sent to prisoner camps, while in other cases they are humiliated, tortured, and in some cases even executed in public (Lankov, 2008). Although movement out of North Korea is improving, there is little research to support the quality of life of defectors who successfully relocate. It should also be noted that the term ‘defector’ has a very unclear definition; ‘defector’ could be synonymous with refugee, or illegal immigrant (Lankov, 2008). International involvement will continue to increase as awareness of the human rights violations spreads. Neighboring countries have continued to offer more aid to North Korea, though there is fear that the ability to do that will soon dissipate (Wolman, 2013).

**Solutions**

The changes the North Korean government would have to face in order to see progress within their country is debatable. While the government tries to instill fear on its people, they have equal fear that the people will backlash against its brutality and punishment. North Korea also feels threatened by the possibility of retribution from their sympathizers, including South Korea. All of this in mind, it is evident that those in control of North Korea do not want to see change in their state. Instead, they are continuously trying to suppress economic hardships, maintain the conformity of their people, and build what Kim Jong II considers to be “paradise.” Unfortunately, the subtle leniencies the government has unintentionally given to the people, such as easing on travel laws, has paved way for the truth North Korean propaganda tries to withhold. Thus, change is inevitable in North Korea, and the most effective means to establishing a stable and controlled country lies in the government itself.

Within the government of North Korea, there are two primary changes that are necessary. First and foremost, the government would have to tolerate the exchange of information and allow travel. Success of most industries today rely on the movement of products and exchange of currency; according
to Lankov (2008), a person can’t be expected to run a successful business in a country where it is illegal to leave their place of residence. Therefore, a stable economy depends on the movement of goods and services. If the government allowed the movement of goods into and out of the country, black market businesses would be unnecessary and thus the government could profit. Second, North Korea’s stance on nuclear weaponry is also problematic. On one hand, agreeing to dismantle the nuclear development programs would provide reason for the United States to restore aid to the country. This could have immediate effects on the country, providing a boost of income to jumpstart the economy and reestablish the support of the people. Yet, on the other hand, North Korea is not confident that national security would be possible without nuclear weaponry. Regardless, nuclear weaponry should not take priority over the people; the focus of the North Korean government should be the care and capability to meet basic human needs.

Lastly, neighboring countries such as China should continue providing aid to North Korea, but they should reconsider their policy on defectors. North Korea could not function without the support of China, so the country should use that influence to push for reforms and to support the rights of defectors. These criticisms could expand to the broader international community, which has not paid enough attention to the human rights abuses happening to regular people within North Korea.

Conclusion

There are important connections between the economy and human rights violations in North Korea, and it is imperative that the international community considers these issues. Famine and abuse have spread across the entire region, causing uncertainty and fear of government among people who have been taught to rely on the state for their basic needs. In return, North Korean government officials depend on punishment as the only remaining solution to maintaining conformity within North Korea. North Korean style of punishment has perhaps raised more international concern than the socio-
economic violations inflicted on people in daily life. Prison camps and executions serve to instill fear in the people and further the totalitarian concept of total control, while simultaneously raising international alarm to the atrocities faced by the people. While neighboring countries have provided aid to the North Koreans, there lies a discrepancy in their official response to the situation. Maintaining diplomatic relations remains a concern for China, while enemies such as South Korea fear a domino effect that threatens its own stability. The United States refuses to provide aid to North Korea so long as they continue nuclear development. While allowing non-governmental involvement in North Korea, all economic aid has been cut off. At the same time, knowledge of life in South Korea makes its way back to North Korea, where people will gradually discover the liberties and freedoms enjoyed by the South Koreans and become increasingly angry about their own situations. Unfortunately, North Korean leaders are in no hurry for change and will continue to brutally punish those who seek it, similar to past responses to social movement activity. No matter how slow the progress occurs, North Koreans will discover exactly what governmental propaganda is hiding. Hopefully neighboring countries, foreign powers, and domestic outrage will erode the “paradise” created under Kim Jong II and his predecessors.

References


