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Democratization

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### **North Korean Ideologies and Democracy**

Korea's delicate ideology after a long period of bloody colonization and then constant interference by the UN and Soviet Union lead to an unmendable divide on the 38th parallel. Korea which was once whole had become split not just by land but by ideology and regime styles. How did ideology divide the state? The history is complicated and belongs to more than just Korea. The chances of reconciliation waver each year as nuclear threats and sanctions are placed. The overall North Korean Juche and Soviet influenced ideology pushes the two Koreas further away from a safe peaceful reconnection. Democracy is far from reaching The Democratic People's Republic of Korea, with the influence of Stalin, Juche thought and a weak economy democracy may never reach the citizens or succeed in longevity.

### **History of the Divided Korea**

Korea used to be a united country. During its time within the Japanese empire, the ideologies split in the country. The Japanese occupation is still a painful past to many Koreans, the history not even 100 years old. There was much suffering, death, and drafting of "comfort women" during the occupation that still goes unacknowledged by Japan. Within Korea, many different parties rose to fight back against the Japanese. The divide between Marxist revolutionaries with soviet backing and Korean Nationalists that relied on the United Nations (Britannica). Since America and the Soviet Union were

victorious in WWII they took it upon themselves to deal with Japan's colonies. This meant the tug of war on Korea started. The Impact of Soviet and American drastic ideological differences and aid in Korea led to no agreement on the internal government within Korea. These rival identities not only sparked the divide but in 1948, created two separate countries because of the disagreement. The 38th parallel was the soft border between the two sides. Soviets sided with the Marxist guerilla fighters in the north and America sided with the industrial and science-backed Korean Nationalists in the south (Britannica). Since both claimed to be the legitimate government of all Korea, a tension was born. Police and militia forces grew quickly and small-scale attacks by both sides started, estimated 30 thousand lost their lives before the Korean war even started. Only two years after the divide, North Korean, Soviet, and Chinese forces were unified by Kim Il-Sung and marched toward Seoul. The outside forces were slow and ineffective for weeks leading to many casualties and increased reinforcements from the Soviets and the Chinese Nationalist Party (Khan Academy). In 1953 the ceasefire was signed and the hard DMZ border was created. With the harshest border in the world, the ideological divide cannot cross over.

### **History of North Korean Ideology**

The division of Korea has been in place for nearly 70 years. What is the North Korean Ideology? As the country was whole for many years before the division. What sparked this and kept the parts separated indefinitely? With recent Communist wins in China and Soviet strides in warfare and weapon making. The United Nations was scared of the looming threat to "western" civilization. The United States with approval from the United Nations pushed back on the borders of Soviet influence in Korea. It is

argued that the decision of China to participate in the Korean war shaped the war and after-effects of the ideological divide (Sheng 2002). One of the main theories in the ideological divide suggests the “CCP’s Leninist ideology, revolutionary experience, the “middle-kingdom” mentality, as well as security concerns, to explain Beijing’s decision to intervene and the solid foundation of the Sino-Soviet alliance during the Korean crisis” (Sheng 2002). As a territorial battle between different ideologies took place in Korea, the real masterminds were not Korean. Mao’s decision was not about the United States. Mao’s expectation of a quick victory over the UN encouraged him to fight with the capitalist/imperialist West in general, and Korea happened to be the battleground (Sheng 2002). The strong Confucianist views that were spread from China long before the war remained a driving force in Korea through the war. With different interpretations and importance, the divide put a strain on the political relationships in Korea (Steinberg 2006). The result of the Korean war would be substantive as well as symbolic for the communist vs capitalist ideological and political war. North Korea is an aggressive and expansionist state, they still have a political branch in charge of Korean unification so it’s no surprise that “Not only did the North initiate the war in June 1950, but since that time it has been prepared to attack at a moment’s notice (Kang 1995).

The past ideology set up North Korea and its “cult mentality”. Mao seemed to be determined and consistent in pushing for an aggressive policy of intervention in Korea. The Chinese records show that Mao’s consistency continued, and he never wavered from his commitment to his duty as a good international communist internationalism. As quoted in Sheng’s paper (2002) Mao said that “if Korea were completely occupied by the U.S, the American invaders would be more rampant, and such a situation would be

detrimental to the entire East" so China was prepared to wipe out the invaders (Sheng 2002). As outsiders in a war with neighboring countries the Chinese were able to capitalize on the "white invader" fear. This led to a push away from the American forces and drove the northern communists further away and to war. War decided many lives and many sides. So during the three-year war, the soft borders on the 48th parallel were made hard and innocent citizens were forced to pick a side.

Now with time for the divided nation to relax after the war ended with no gain to either side, North Korea's party identification became more clear and individual. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea took ideology from the Soviets and China. North Korea stole the idea of Marxism–Leninism, and Kim Il-sung was hailed as the greatest Marxist–Leninist of all time. This Marxist-Leninist system means that they adopt the rise of the proletariat and accept a dictator to reign over them. With the rising of the people then everyone can become equal under one's overreaching power. This belief was used in the East Bloc in the Soviet Union. Russia left a lasting impression on the government and ideology of North Korea.

The monolithic beliefs of the government system in North Korea create a system of power influence over everything. The supreme leader is the dictator of the party and allows some discussion within the party. Since they rule the state, party, police, and other necessary institutions the power is nearly unrivaled. The cult following began after 1967 and grew stronger because it was an entire family of leaders. This idea capitalized on patriarchy and the strong familial values that Korea has practiced for centuries. The people easily could follow the notion that the monolithic beliefs are reasonable within

past dynasty rule and history. Doubt was spread after the economic downturn and then the regime used a political culture of terror to remain in strict control.

A quick set of arrests were made in North Korea to keep the party pure. Many people were arrested and replaced with more ideologically similar persons and the rulers demonstrated the ease of control over the party. The government strengthened the anti-revolutionary police force and laws to strike fear into the people. According to Seong-Chang Cheong's (2000) paper it was estimated that North Korea kept 150-200 thousand political prisoners deemed oppositionists. Crimes of speaking against the "Great Leader" could be punished, but also things like rape, theft, and homicide could get one executed publicly for "social education" (Cheong 2000). The regime took power and turned it into a wielding force against those who spoke out against it. Over time the policy of terror became one of the most powerful tools of rule in North Korea.

### **North Korean Ideology compared to Stalinism**

Compare Stalinism to North Korea's regime. The coined term Leninism is used in North Korea to describe the ideology, but there is a vital distance between Leninism and the cult-like following that Kim Jong Il started. The Korean Workers' Party adopted the supreme leader above all notions while others followed Marxist-Leninism (Cheong 2000). The ruling Kim family made sure to have strong connections to powerful Soviet officers. These strong ties helped them in the Korean war and develop the Marxist-Leninism of North Korea today.

Similar to how Stalin handled Lenin's death in Soviet countries, Stalin created a monolithic belief that he was spreading his wants of Lenin and thus controlled all institutions. This central power and belief system was united by the death of Lenin.

Similarly, after the Korean war and Japanese independence, Kim Il Sung united his side of a war-torn country (Cheong 2000). Stalin controlled every aspect of education and public policy so there was little to no room for deviation or change. All scholars and critics were controlled and the following of Stalin was unstoppable. Understanding Stalinism is important to understand why Kim Il Sung did what he did and why North Korea will not back down from its stance. The proletariat only wants the proletariat state and revolt against others. Since the Stalinism ideology was adopted during and enforced after independence from the Japanese North Korean citizens did not know or want better. Marxism was appealing to those who were forced into labor camps or ruled over by a neighboring island nation.

After the division, North Korean leaders stressed the role of “revolutionary tradition” and the quality education of workers and party members. The Korean Workers Party also promoted the role of national prestige and self-confidence and called for the further promotion of national heritage and the revival of national tradition (Cheong 2000). In the turmoil of the Sino-Soviet dispute that coincided with the formation of the Juche ideological system, the hammering out of an independent line for North Korean socialism intersected with its strengthening of nationalism. Many North Korean theoreticians were influenced by the Stalinist version of Marxism-Leninism. Nevertheless, changes in domestic and international policies gradually forced Kim Il Sung and the KWP ideologists to revise their attitude toward “nation” and “nationalism.” “Until the early 1960s, North Korean leaders supported Stalin’s definition of a “nation”—“a stable, historically formed community of people based on common language, territory, economic life, and culture” (Cheong 2000). However, beginning in

the mid-1960s, the first change was made. "Shared bloodline" was added to the definition of elements that constitute a "nation" (Cheong 2000). This addition of bloodline strengthened the claim that the Kims have the supreme leader but also increased xenophobia and harmful nationalist ideas. The Kim regime held onto the strong nationalist identity as a way to unify North Korea.

As stated in the above section, North Korea practiced political terror as one of the biggest controls of the population. Stalin used these practices and it was one of the most known systems of his rule. To eradicate public opposition Lenin and Stalin both had public trials, extreme repression, and punishment for political opposition. Stalin himself purged the military of many commanders and chiefs to make sure that they could never threaten his rule or deliver a coup against him. Only 12 commanders remained out of the 87 commanders who were spared from execution. The strict rule was not reserved for only Stalin, but his well-known status coined it to be a Stalinist practice.

While North Korean leaders follow the path of Stalin closely they also mixed in some Maoist views. The Chinese cultural revolution was avoided by Korea and deemed too unreasonable and utopian. Kim Il Sung took a more realist approach and combined the revolutions of Mao and Stalin. This combination led to the simultaneous change in people's thinking and material bias. The Korean Workers Party constructed these ideologies to keep the people in line. A group thinking of lessened material biased and socially constructed proletariat along with a supreme leader balanced both communist lines of ideology. This balance that was achieved by North Korea has lasted. Though we

cannot peer into the country and gauge exactly what is unfolding, the state's sovereignty is strong because of the ideologies they crafted from others.

### **Juche Thought**

Juche thought was created in North Korea as an ideology, government, and way of life. Researchers like Brian Meyers 2008 deem it a "whole philosophical concept which is essentially self-reliance". Juche is a combination stated before of Confucianism, shamanism, Marxism, and other strangely incompatible ideas. After Mao created how to own a unique take on Marxism, Kim Il Sung wanted to as well. He called it the "Juche Sasang" and at first, made it secretive but later was striving for the international stage (Meyers 2008). This ideology spread with the help of propaganda and artwork depicting North Koreans as subjugated to the western imperial world. Racial purity came into play to solidify the shaky beginnings of Juche thought (Meyers 2008). Kim Il Sung deemed himself the protector of the Koreans that had been exploited. The "paranoid ethnocentrism" that is created from the cult mentality and racial tensions was used in Lenin-Marxist states and is further exploited by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Nationalist ideas spread from the Japanese ethnic superiority during WWII (Shin, Freda, and Yi 1999). Uniquely modern dimensions of ethnicity started in many warring countries. In fact in Korea, there exists a substantial overlap between race, ethnicity, and nation so the Juche divisions demanded that they were superior to others and yet asked for military and economic aid from others (Shin, Freda, and Yi 1999). The Juche system has been "maintained by controlling information and isolating the people from the outside world, both to prevent them from comparing



North Korea with other countries and to maintain a sense of hostility toward the outside world to reinforce internal unity” (Park 2014). The military factors into the control and pride of the Juche system. Internal strength is proved by a possible reunification of Korea, but since South Korea is striding ahead technologically this can cause desperation for North Korea. The "closing window of opportunity" in reunifying to rightful Korea, may cause a desperate North Korea to launch an attack before the goal is too far from achievable (Kang 1995). Juche isolation may or may not include South Korea, where the North Koreans deem that they should rightfully rule with the monolithic god-like ideology.

Economically North Korea is struggling by upholding its Juche values. The gross national income of the average North Korean was around \$1500 (Park 2014). The first two leaders made North Korea extremely isolated whereas Kim Jong Un has now tried to help the economy he inherited. Many economic disasters happened in the 1990s: the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kim Il-sung's death, natural disasters, and severe famine (Park 2014). The self-reliant Juche belief shows itself in the economic strategy. Kim Il Sung isolated North Korea by participating less in global trade. It is justified to reach out with things that are needed but or else the country remains ostracized. Even with NGOs' food aid, North Korean leaders deem this a threat to the self-reliant strategy. North Korea's first response to the “food aid in the 1990s was to decrease its investment in the agricultural sector, thereby proving that it is as happy to rely on capitalist outsiders as socialist ones. Granted, when foreign aid groups demand to monitor food distribution. North Korea objects angrily, but only because its isolation is threatened” (Meyers 2008). This displays a key factor in open and closed society. North Korea has survived

because of its isolation and upheld sovereignty. The country's weak economy displays a weak foundation for democracy. The regime knows that the more outsiders that get involved, the Juche ideology will not be able to keep the North Korean citizens in line.

Gender and strict patriarchy also fall into the Juche thought. This clarified and strengthened the man's position in North Korea. The scholars within North Korea write "That man occupies the position of the master of the world does not mean that he really rules the outer world in its infiniteness. The true meaning is that man is the master of all things in the sense that man is not ruled by the outer world, but is instead a being who lives in domination of all natural and social phenomena" (Meyers 2008). Where Juche thought may not be applied to the government in North Korea, it is used to keep repressing the masses. When the strict ideology already represses women with a patriarchal family system, half of the battle is done. With little power in the system women protesting or speaking up can be easily discredited by the regime. The system is still stuck between evolution and history. The ideology also serves as a market for international action. North Korea is upholding its self-reliant motto and citizens have missed out on many revolutions, freedoms, and historical changes that the world has gone through. The '60s and 70's in America brought so much change but by establishing Juche thought, outsiders' and insiders' ideas are deemed dangerous and never shared with the public. Juche thought may have kept North Korea as an untouched time capsule from the past. Whether this is dangerous or harmless is yet to be discovered.

### **Comparative South Korean Ideology**

Since we have a closer look into South Korean Ideology due to better connections and open borders, a comparison is needed. South Korea has evolved a lot since the war. North Korea had many of the minerals and labor work while South Korea worked on industry and education. This built the infrastructure for democracy and a stable transition with the help of the United States. South Korea was not always a democratic state, in June 1987 the state was faced with massive demonstrations in the streets against military rule. The masses were protesting the prospect that the 1988 Olympics might be moved from Seoul due to the undemocratic regime. The United States openly in favor of democracy, dissuaded the Korean state from using the military to suppress the people. The government then gave in to the popular wish for political reform and a more democratic state. The Republic of Korea has formed over 200 political parties since the division, and the political culture is fast changing (Steinberg 2006). They use many merger parties to create a more cohesive party and remain in control. The old influences of Confucianism were strong in Korea, only 2% of the population would declare themselves that but socially the whole of Korea is closer to social Confucianism with a western infrastructure thanks to the United States. The intermingling of international intervention with the Korean culture created a strong tie to democratic values. Contradicting this is the Republic of Korea's procedural democracy that is closely tied with traditional views. The Korean Confucian political structure demands orthodoxy. The driving force has been the patriarchal family, where the father takes charge of the family, and compromise, one of the most essential attributes of democracy, becomes more difficult. In the cause of the patriarchy and its strict moral authority of the father-leader, who must care for his people (Steinberg 2006). As for

many patriarchal societies, virtually no free voting exists in the National Assembly, the party leadership determines who to vote for.

The result was an ideology of the right that not only prohibited the advocacy of communism or anything favorable to North Korea but also banned unauthorized contact with that state or its people, the reading of proscribed materials on communism, and even criticism of the social system of South Korea. The latter prohibition appeared to be an effort to stamp out even democratic socialism (Steinberg 2006). The United States had a huge effect on the elections and messaging during the cold war. The American military government began to systematically suppress people's committees that had left-leaning groups "attempts from the left, beginning with liberation in 1945, were met with strong opposition from the U.S. military occupation" (Steinberg 2006). This move was designed to ensure that Syngman Rhee, an anti-Japanese advocate, would assume power in the "free" elections after WWII. "Rhee was an autocrat whom the American press portrayed as a democrat, part of the 'free world,' and anti-communist" (Steinberg 2006). With American and the UN intervention leading South Korea on the "right path", there were still many obstacles to development. The economic divide and corruption still affected South Korea. The nationalism that lives in North Korea is strong but also South Korea struggles with it. Nationalism helped them get through a huge economic downturn and rebuild after the war. This leaves out all North Korean sympathizers and foreigners in a growingly international country. North Korean defectors are quickly socialized to become international Korean and are highly discouraged from spreading NK's views (Kim 2017). This internal censoring of South Korea may be on this topic, but it inadvertently mirrors the censorship in North Korea.

The question is posed as to why did America agree to give up North Korea? What strategy lies in intervening within the Korean war? South Korea doesn't have many natural resources, and thus controlling them wasn't an issue. Two countries that are so close but so far in ideologies aid the claim that vicinity does not play a part in democracy but can turn into a double-edged sword. Any international intervention turned into an argument for war and disaster.

### **Democracy in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea**

The ideology that was split during the Japanese occupation and then exploited by the Soviets and the US has created what we now see as a security risk. With the help of two global superpowers, North Korea could attack South Korea during the Korean war and be winning for a good amount of time. After the conflict came to a tense ending North Korea was left to reflect on its thoughts. Stalin and Mao had a great influence on leader Kim Il Sung and he pieced together ideologies to create the perfect system of power and repression in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The Juche system of thought created a strict system that fed into the cult mentality. If North Korea didn't go by the Juche methods of self-reliance and isolation, the state would not exist. The military strength may be outdated but still poses threat for those wanting to involve themselves in North Korean matters. The threat of forced reunification may still be possible but without outside technology, there is less of a technological threat for Korea. The sheer capabilities to remain uninfluenced and sovereign is a strength that North Korea knows it possesses. Leaders like Kim Il Sung and Kim Jung Un may seem crazy to those looking at Korea as outsiders. The tactics that they used to establish and uphold the state are actually smart. No one will threaten a nuclear weapon holding the

state's sovereignty, and North Korea just wants to be self-reliant. International actors will not be able to influence democratization in a strong sovereign state.

The problem that threatens North Korea's regime is the economic crisis. After the 1990's when many disasters hit and caused deaths and famine the country was starving. Starving people can become desperate and also NGOs want to involve themselves to help the suffering population. North Korea needs to keep its image high and not allow people within its borders as per the Juche thought and strict cult mentality that rules the country. Kim Jong Un has boosted the economy by opening very slightly to certain countries. This creates more information coming in and out of the country which could bring it closer to democratization.

As far as democracy goes in North Korea, they are far off from democratization as far as we can tell. The soviet ethnic divide and strong Juche nationalism particularly concern the potential danger to social stability and political developments such as democratization (Shin, Freda, and Yi 1999). Since North Korea is very homogenous the people unite against all outsiders and outside information. Democracy is shunned in a way that communism is shunned in South Korea. Schools, literature, and media all are centered on the North Korean government and ideology. There is little room for question, after the intervention of the Soviets and the United States the division of Korea has been nearly solidified.

### **Conclusion**

The 48th Parallel marked the division between a communist and a Democratic-backed country. Once whole Korea was now ideologically and physically divided. After going through the literature of the past and present of Korea's beliefs and

government systems I can say that the outside forces influenced the divide in the country. Japan's breakdown of Korean society created a common enemy and sparked ethnocentrism that is seen in both North and South Korea. The allies stationed in Korea defeated Japan and then broke apart Korea like a piece of food. The country without Russia and the United States' influence may have been able to mend its differences but the Korean war was coined the very first proxy war in the infamous Cold War. After the borders were solid North Korea developed its own ideology and cult following that gave the monolithic leaders power. The next step in having a state all to itself was establishing a strong military and strong sovereignty. The Juche thought created by North Korean Marxist scholars fueled a repressive society. North Korean leaders never backed down from their ideology even when the Soviet Union and Mao's system fell.

North Korea will have a very difficult time changing to democracy if it ever does. The years of practices in place that are entirely undemocratic and multiple generations born in a system without knowing democracy will not be a good foundation for change. The best option for democracy would be to help the economy in North Korea and to open the society so that some information from other countries may pass through. The likeness of this happening in my opinion is extremely low because Kim Jong Un has seen all the other systems like his own fail after opening trade and borders. He will remain in power whether his people starve or prosper. Having South Korea right below is almost a taunt but keeps the Democratic People's Republic of Korea sharp and strong. Outside forces keep the North Korean regime fighting for sovereignty. I cannot see any overwhelming reason for outsiders to invade North Korea and change the regime, so the self-reliant elite society may continue to prosper, and the citizens will fall

deeper into poverty in desperate isolation. Even humanitarian efforts are wasted and unused by the regime. There is little hope for democracy in North Korea, where the hatred of the west is spread over dinner conversation and trade is completely reliant on the whims of a god-like leader.

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