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THESIS

HOW INCREASED INFORMATION ACCESS AND THE SECONDARY ECONOMY HAVE IMPACTED REGIME STABILITY IN NORTH KOREA

by

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As perhaps the world's most closed-off nation, North Korea attracts global attention for its extreme authoritarian governance and impoverished population. Some North Korea analysts, though, question whether the Kim regime is sustainable, pointing in particular to the expansion of the secondary economy and increased access to outside information, which might be eroding the regime's ability to exert its power over the North Korean population. Others believe these factors' impacts are negligible and might even present the regime with the ability to exert power in new ways. This thesis analyzes both the extent to which these two factors have changed North Korean society and countermeasures the regime has implemented to counter their regime-threatening effects. It ultimately contends that the effects of expanded information access and secondary market activity on regime stability are likely negligible.

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HOW INCREASED INFORMATION ACCESS AND THE SECONDARY ECONOMY HAVE IMPACTED REGIME STABILITY IN NORTH KOREA

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ABSTRACT

As perhaps the world's most closed-off nation, North Korea attracts global attention for its extreme authoritarian governance and impoverished population. Some North Korea analysts, though, question whether the Kim regime is sustainable, pointing in particular to the expansion of the secondary economy and increased access to outside information, which might be eroding the regime's ability to exert its power over the North Korean population. Others believe these factors' impacts are negligible and might even present the regime with the ability to exert power in new ways. This thesis analyzes both the extent to which these two factors have changed North Korean society and countermeasures the regime has implemented to counter their regime-threatening effects. It ultimately contends that the effects of expanded information access and secondary market activity on regime stability are likely negligible.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

DPRK	Democratic People's Republic of North Korea
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
KJI	Kim Jong-Il
KJU	Kim Jong-Un
KWP	Korean Worker's Party
MSC	Military Support Command
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PRC	People's Republic of China

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION

This thesis seeks to answer the following question: how has increased access to information and the secondary economy impacted regime stability in North Korea? It will examine whether or not the increase in information flow and expansion of the secondary (private and non-government-controlled) economy in North Korea has degraded, emboldened, or minimally impacted Kim Jong-Un's regime security. Information flows and the secondary economy have steadily increased for decades, aided by advancements in and more access to technology.

While ample literature exists on this subject, there is no consensus. Some authors believe increased information access and the growing secondary economy will eventually lead to Kim's demise, while others believe these have in fact emboldened the regime even further. This thesis will analyze the nature of the threats to regime security and the effectiveness of the tactics North Korea has implemented to mitigate them, using comparative analysis with previous Kim regimes to help assess regime strength amid limited data on absolute levels of regime strength.

B. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

The United States' primary concern regarding North Korea is its possession of nuclear weapons. Because of this, closely monitoring the potentially destabilizing effect that information access and the secondary economy have on regime stability is vital for the United States and its allies, even if any sudden shifts are unlikely in the near term. In the long term, an unstable regime with nuclear capabilities partially surrounded by its adversaries presents the United States with a challenge. Dating back to Kim Jong-Il's ascent to power in the mid-1990s, North Korea's main leverage on an international scale stems from this threat, and it has not been shy in demonstrating it. Because of Kim Jong-Un's nuclear capability, regime security in North Korea is constantly on the forefront of United States policymakers' minds. According to State Department spokesman Ned Price, "the DPRK's nuclear weapons program…is not only a threat to the United States, is not

only a threat to our allies in the region, but it poses a threat to regional peace and security. It is something that also implicates the PRC (People's Republic of China)."[1] North Korea's nuclear arsenal is diverse, ranging from short-range to intercontinental ballistic missiles. Since Kim Jong-Il's son Kim Jong-Un assumed power as Supreme Leader in 2011, this arsenal has vastly expanded, including a significant increase in missile launches, which are typically used as bargaining chips in negotiations with foreign nations.[2] The issue of nuclear weapons has spanned multiple United States administrations regardless of political leanings, from Bill Clinton's through Joe Biden's, and will likely remain at the forefront of foreign policy concerns for the foreseeable future. Because North Korea's nuclear arsenal is its chief source of leverage in negotiations, the United States and other allied entities should not expect Kim to budge on his stance against denuclearization.[3]

North Korea's ties to the People's Republic of China add a twist to the predicament. For all intents and purposes, the Kim regime is backed by China to counter United States troops' presence in the region, specifically those in South Korea. China desires a stable Kim regime because of the potential implications should conflict break out on the peninsula – most of all, because of the prospect of being embroiled in an unwanted war. China's preference in North Korea is the status quo; and without its direct intervention, North Korea would likely lose a conventional war with South Korea, leading to a United States ally on its border.[4] Meanwhile, in the event of conflict with China, North Korea poses a serious threat to the United States and its regional allies, in addition to the threat China itself presents. If the Kim regime were to collapse, a power vacuum would almost certainly occur, not to mention a massive humanitarian crisis amongst those reliant on the government for basic human needs.

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[1] Ned Price, "Department Press Briefing" (Washington, D.C.: United States State Department, February 2, 2023), https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-february-2-2023/.

[2] BBC, "North Korea: What Missiles Does It Have?," *British Broadcasting Corporation*, Reality Check, January 3, 2023, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41174689.

[3] Commander Fredrick "Skip" Vincenzo, "An Information Strategy to Reduce North Korea's Increasing Threat: Recommends for ROK & U.S. Policy Makers," *U.S. Korea Institute at SAIS*, October 2016, p. 7, https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep06264.

[4] Vincenzo, "An Information Strategy to Reduce North Korea's Increasing Threat," 4.

Furthermore, a collapsing Kim regime could lead to reunification of North and South Korea, which would complicate regional relations. The immediate impact would likely include a massive humanitarian disaster on the peninsula, requiring immediate intervention by outside entities. There is even evidence to suggest that Beijing and Washington have previously communicated in reference to contingency planning should the North Korean regime collapse.[5]

C. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

There is no denying that both access to information and the secondary economy are expanding as technology evolves, though there is some uncertainty of the impacts in recent years because of lockdowns resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite this, no known uprisings have occurred in North Korea, and the number of refugees from the North settling in South Korea has sharply declined since Kim Jong-Un assumed power in 2011.[6] Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has enabled the Kim regime to implement border control initiatives even more harshly, as the number of defectors to South Korea dropped to 229 in 2020, compared to 2,706 when Kim Jong-Un came into power.[7] Most obviously, though, is that Kim Jong-Un remains in power, which evidently demonstrates his ability to implement effective techniques to mitigate the threat of information growth and the secondary economy's destabilizing factors. This thesis will explore the hypotheses introduced above in the literature review in greater depth, with regard to both their current applicability and whether there is reason to believe that the causal factors driving them so far are likely to continue. I will do this by assessing several indicators of regime stability, including defection rates, existence of purges in governmental leadership, and the history

[5] Covell Meyskens, "Chinese Views of the Nuclear Endgame in North Korea," *The Nonproliferation Review* 26, no. 5–6 (October 10, 2019): 499–517, https://doi-org.libproxy.nps.edu/10.1080/10736700.2019.1667050.

[6] Byung-Yeon Kim, "Households: Surviving in Informal Markets," in *Unveiling the North Korean Economy: Collapse and Transition* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 94–96.

[7] Robert R. King, "Number of North Korean Defectors Drops to Lowest Level in Two Decades," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, January 27, 2021, https://www.csis.org/analysis/number-north-korean-defectors-drops-lowest-level-two-decades. Byung-Yeon Kim, "Regime Stability in North Korea," in *Unveiling the North Korean Economy: Collapse and Transition* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 173–216.

of protests. Additionally, since early 2023 Kim Jong-Un has made a new and concerted effort to showcase his daughter, raising speculation that he is already looking toward succession; but whether this reflects strength or weakness remains unclear.[8]

D. RESEARCH DESIGN

This thesis will analyze how increased information access and the secondary economy's growth have impacted regime security in North Korea. These are closely intertwined, as illicit sales in the secondary economy often make more information and information-boosting technology available, but for analytical simplicity the thesis will address them separately.

Since North Korea is a unique state, in that it has managed to survive for over 70 years without any genuine uprisings, cross-national comparison will be limited. The thesis will, however, seek to quantify information's and the secondary economy's impact on Kim Jong-Un's regime by conducting comparative analysis with the regimes of his predecessors, Kim Il-Sung (who ruled until 1994) and Kim Jong-Il (who ruled from 1994 to 2011)

This thesis will include research from both academic and non-academic analytical sources, which, in turn rely upon information from such primary sources as North Korean defectors, United States policy documents, and statistics bureaus, in order to ensure an all-encompassing causal argument. Additionally, a brief historical analysis will be necessary to contextualize the current state of the DPRK.

Specifics are comparatively inaccessible due to North Korea's closed-off nature, but the thesis will attempt to quantify evidence when possible. It is worth noting that most specific details regarding daily life in North Korea are based on first-hand defector accounts and survey participation, but this is not likely to produce excessive bias, since the thesis mainly aims to assess first-order increases or decreases in regime stability, not precise absolute levels of stability.

[8] "Succession Questions Raised by Presence of Kim's Daughter," *BBC News*, February 9, 2023, sec. Asia, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-64581465.

E. THESIS OVERVIEW

This thesis is structured into four chapters. The first chapter includes an literature review, separated into two parts. First, the literature review defines what information means in the context of this thesis, reviews existing literature that explains how increased information has weakened the regime, and reviews existing literature that explains why the regime can withstand it. Second, the literature review follows the same pattern for the secondary economy. This chapter also explains the significance of the thesis question, ultimately establishing why this topic is relevant to investigate in today's geopolitical landscape.

The second chapter will establish how each regime in North Korea has managed information access, focusing on the famine times to modern day. Additionally, the first chapter will explain how and why information access has increased. Next, this chapter will present how the content of information, as well as the means to access it, has evolved.

The third chapter will mimic the second chapter but adjusted toward the secondary economy. This chapter will examine how the secondary economy has evolved, specifically since the famine that caused it to become commonplace in North Korea.

Both the second and the third chapters will also discuss how the Kim regimes have combatted the threats from both increased information access and the secondary economy. This will include mitigating factors and policy initiatives focused on these issues, as well as the evolution of their respective enforcement.

The final chapter includes an overall analysis based of regime stability, measured by factors such as defection rates, elite purges and reshuffling, and lack of political movements or protests. This is proceeded by an assessment of why the secondary economy and increased information access have had a negligible effect on regime stability.

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II. HOW INFORMATION ACCESS HAS EVOLVED TO ITS CURRENT STATE TODAY

> Citizens are guaranteed freedom of speech, the press, assembly, demonstration, and association. The State shall guarantee the conditions for the free activities of democratic political parties and social organizations.
>
> —Article 67 of the DPRK's constitution[9]

This chapter will explain how information has increased in North Korea, the means by which people access the information, and how the regime has countered the effects.

Ignorance of the outside world is an oft-cited reason for the lack of public uprising or dissent amongst common North Korean citizens. It is thought that North Koreans are unaware of how good life is outside of Kim Jong-Un's repressive regime – that state-sponsored propaganda has infiltrated nearly every aspect of their lives. Western nations, non-governmental organizations, and activists hope that increased access to information will eventually lead to the overthrow of Kim Jong-Un. While there is undoubtedly more widespread access to information and information technology today in North Korea, such a corrosive impact on regime stability remains unproven. Though the true effect is quantitatively immeasurable, no signs exist to indicate any significant erosion of power. The Kim regime remains strongly in power, with no known public dissent, decreasing defector numbers, and seemingly effective countermeasures to the newly acquired knowledge and technology. This is not to suggest that increased information access has had no effect on the regime's stability, but rather that it is merely ne piece in a long-term battle toward reforming North Korea's repressive censorship, surveillance, and human rights abuses.

A. INFORMATION ACCESS BACKGROUND

Anti-Western and pro-North Korean propaganda has played a large role in all three Kim regimes' playbooks for countering outside information. The level of indoctrination is

[9] "DPRK Constitution (2019)," NCNK, May 20, 2021, https://www.ncnk.org/resources/publications/dprk-constitution-2019.pdf/file_view.

beyond any other modern communist or socialist nation, as North Korea ranks 180th or dead last, on the Reporters Without Borders press freedom index, a scale that weighs censorship levels and journalistic freedoms.[10] Only state-sponsored journalistic entities are permitted to operate in the country, including the Korean Worker's Party's (KWP) official newspaper, *Rodong Shinmun*.[11] Through state-sponsored radio broadcasts, television broadcasts, and newspaper articles, the regime consistently portrays the Kim family as God-like beings, while often referring to the United States as "bastards" and "Yankees," blaming many of North Korea's issues on outside imperialism.[12] These references are also prevalent in school textbooks, as children even learn arithmetic by counting and multiplying dead Americans.[13] Defectors have confirmed the efficacy of these tactics.[14] The regime's propaganda campaigns spread even further beyond formal education and media entities. Posters depicting North Korea as the perfect utopian paradise, while also disparaging its neighbor to the south and the United States, are commonplace in just about every public arena.[15] One can even find messages like these on domestic mail, with stamp art forging lies about the Korean War and glorifying the Kim family.[16] The full breadth of North Korean propaganda is impossible to contextualize from an outside perspective, but these examples illustrate the massive effort the Kim family has successfully employed to counter any narrative pumped into the country from outside sources. Cha emphasizes the effect of North Korea's propaganda: "Without control of information, there is no ideology.

[10] Reports Without Borders, "North Korea | RSF," July 6, 2020, https://rsf.org/en/country/north-korea.

[11] Andrei Lankov, *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 99–102.

[12] Lankov, *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia,* 56–58.

[13] Yeonmi Park, "The Dear Leader," in *In Order to Live: A North Korean Girl's Journey to Freedom* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015), 49.

[14] Park.

[15] A.K. Vorobeva and S.S. Ragozina, "North Korean Posters as a Mean of Propaganda," *Kazan Federal University* 23, no. 2 (2021): 316–330, https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-1438-2021-23-2-316-330.

[16] Mark Sommer, "Pyongyang, Propaganda and Postage Stamps," *North Korean Review* 13, no. 2 (2017): 74–83, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26396123.

Without ideology, there is no North Korea. The Kim regime knows that its biggest threat comes from within rather than from without."[17]

During the Kim Il-Sung era, outside information was scarce and primarily arrived via leaflets from South Korea, non-governmental organizations, and the United States and through foreign radio broadcasts that targeted the people of North Korea.[18] Strict allegiance to *juche* ideology and leadership was also at its height under Kim Il-Sung because of minimal access to outside information. Indoctrinating the people was easier for Kim Il-Sung, who held almost total control over what North Koreans consumed, along with a harsh guilt-by-association punishment system that is still employed today. North Koreans also had less reason to seek outside information during the Kim Il-Sung era because South Korea, in comparison, was an impoverished authoritarian state, while the DPRK was largely able to provide for its people.

B. HOW INFORMATION ACCESS HAS EVOLVED SINCE FAMINE

When Kim Jong-Il succeeded his father as North Korea's Dear Leader, his regime was immediately met with a national crisis. The breakdown of the socialist nation's relatively effective public distribution system, which provided most daily necessities to its population yielded a growing market for outside information via illegal trade. With millions starving and an economy in total collapse, North Korean leadership's near complete blockade of outside information was gradually derailed. Outside information began entering North Korea because of a less restrictive security apparatus amidst the nationwide famine. Enforcement of previously strict bans on internal movement, private trade, and technology consumption were loosened from 1994–2004 because of growing institutional corruption.[19] During this period, law enforcement related to the aforementioned bans could be avoided with a simple bribe, as the government privately

[17] Victor Cha, "The End Is Near," in *The Impossible State: North Korea, Past and Future* (New York: Harper Collins, 2018), 461.

[18] Jieun Baek, "'Old School' Media: From Trader Gossip to Freedom Balloons," in *North Korea's Hidden Revolution* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016), 95–96.

[19] Ken E. Gause, *Coercion, Control, Surveillance, and Punishment: An Examination of the North Korean Police State* (Washington, DC: Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2012), 48.

recognized its inability to substantively provide for its people.[20] Regaining social control would pose a series of new challenges for Kim Jong-Il.

As the secondary economy was born out of the famine years, access to information expanded. Entrepreneurs not only exchanged food and nourishment through the secondary markets but also sold outside sources of media and media consumption equipment like radios and television sets.[21] Consumption rapidly compounded through word-of-mouth.[22] Kim Jong-Il's administration likely aided the spread of information through these means, as its eyes were more focused on solving the crisis at hand than enforcing the laws banning outside media consumption.

The introduction of cell phones to North Koreans was initially a product of this less restrictive period of Kim Jong-Il's reign, in addition to his growing desire for increased cash inflow during economically difficult years. The Egyptian-based company Orascom was contracted to provide network service to North Korea in 2007, catapulting mobile phone sales ad subscription services.[23] Coverage was concentrated locally in Pyongyang and Rason, though it expanded to several provinces by 2003, through the experimental Sunnet network contracted out to a Thailand-based company.[24] Before it was shut down due to an assassination attempt on Kim Jong-Il, network subscribers reached approximately 20,000 users by 2004.[25] A blanket ban for ordinary civilians was imposed in May 2004,

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[20] Gause, *Coercion, Control, Surveillance, and Punishment: An Examination of the North Korean Police State,* 48.

[21] Andrew Yeo, *State, Society, and Markets in North Korea*, Cambridge Elements (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 4, https://www-cambridge-org.libproxy.nps.edu/core/elements/abs/state-society-and-markets-in-north-korea/FAA574DDE3BC2AD0CF2A1692CF026D6D.

[22] Nat Kretchun, Catherine Lee, and Seamus Tuohy, "Compromising Connectivity: Information Dynamics Between the State and Society in a Digitizing North Korea" (InterMedia, 2017), 4–5, https://www.aquietopening.org/s/Compromising-Connectivity-Full-Report.pdf.

[23] Bernhard Seliger and Stefan Schmidt, "The Hermit Kingdom Goes Online...Information Technology, Internet Use and Communication Policy in North Korea," *North Korean Review* 10, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 76, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43908932.

[24] Martyn Slavney and Natalia Williams, "Twenty Years of Mobile Communications in North Korea – 38 North: Informed Analysis of North Korea," 38 North, November 15, 2022, https://www.38north.org/2022/11/twenty-years-of-mobile-communications-in-north-korea/.

[25] Slavney and Williams, "Twenty Years of Mobile Communications in North Korea – 38 North: Informed Analysis of North Korea."

however, as the regime's seemingly renewed effort to clamp down on the previous decade of reforms ensued.[26]

C. INFORMATION CONTROL UNDER KIM JONG-UN

North Korea under Kim Jong-Un has slowly allowed information technology access to expand, but at no level remotely resembling the modern world. Increased information technology access provides the ordinary citizen the means to rapidly gather and spread information, posing a potentially grave threat to the Kim regime. Therefore, it is no coincidence that technological growth in North Korea lags behind.

Figure 1 depicts the growth of information technology by the means which North Koreans use to view or access illicit materials. Not depicted here is the exponential spread of information accessed on these platforms by word-of-mouth, which 71 percent of defectors reported as a top source of information in North Korea, or by group viewership amongst households, neighbors, and friends.[27]

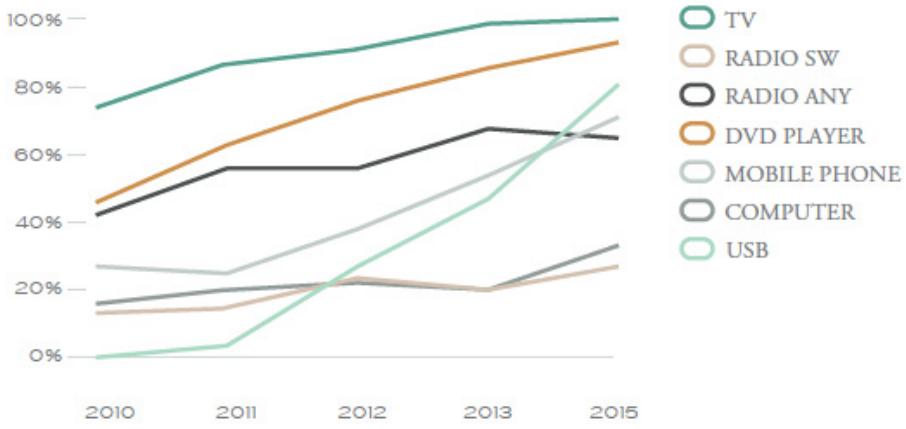

Figure 1. Media and Communication Device Access by Year[28]

[26] Gause, *Coercion, Control, Surveillance, and Punishment,* 55.

[27] Kretchun, Lee, and Tuohy, 4.

[28] Source: Nat Kretchun, Catherine Lee, and Seamus Tuohy, "Compromising Connectivity: Information Dynamics Between the State and Society in a Digitizing North Korea" (InterMedia, 2017), 7, https://www.aquietopening.org/s/Compromising-Connectivity-Full-Report.pdf.

The content displayed on these devices varies depending on the platform. For example, cell phones manufactured and distributed by the North Korean government are extremely restrictive, with pre-installed surveillance applications to monitor for nefarious activity, and these only connect to the state-sponsored intranet.[29] Because of this, cell phones are often smuggled in from China that maintain intermittent connectivity to Chinese networks and are able to conduct international phone calls and unrestricted browsing.[30] Despite the restrictions, however, cell phone use continues to expand. In 2019, North Koreans amassed roughly six million indigenously produced cell phones, of which about 4.2 million had active subscriptions to the state-owned service companies.[31] That number has since grown as 50–80 percent of adults are estimated to possess them today, making cell phones commonplace in modern North Korea.[32] Similar to how information is amplified via word of mouth, North Koreans also share cell phones, so this number is likely an underestimate of actual usage amongst common civilians. Infrastructure to support mobile service coverage has drastically expanded since Kim Jong-Il originally introduced cell phones to North Korean elites in 2004, with at least 93 percent of the country within range of coverage.[33] Despite lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic, subscriptions still increased likely to support the established infrastructure of private trade and also to simply keep in touch while Kim Jong-Un tightened restrictions.[34] See Figure 3.

[29] Jonathan Lim, "Digital Joseon: Digital Transformation Under North Korea's Five-Year Plan," *North Korean Review* 18, no. 1 (2022): 84, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27160576.

[30] Lim, Jonathan Lim, "Digital Joseon: Digital Transformation Under North Korea's Five-Year Plan," 84.

[31] Lim, 84.

[32] Slavney and Williams, "Twenty Years of Mobile Communications in North Korea – 38 North."

[33] Seliger and Schmidt, "The Hermit Kingdom Goes Online...Information Technology, Internet Use and Communication Policy in North Korea," 76–77.

[34] Slavney and Williams, "Twenty Years of Mobile Communications in North Korea – 38 North."

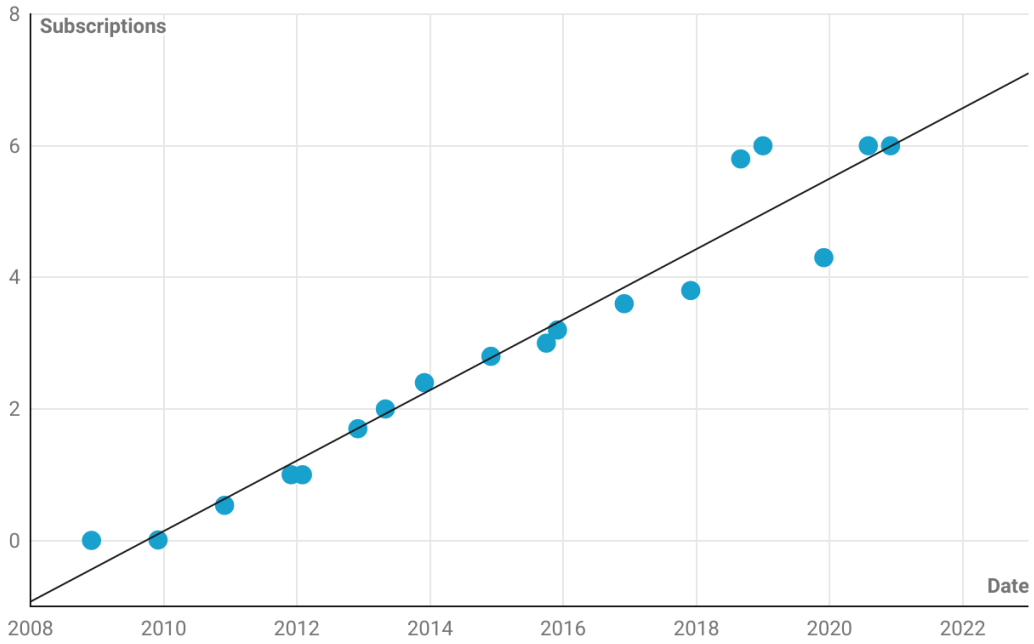

Figure 2. North Korean Cellular Subscriptions by Millions of Subscriber Lines[35]

As previously mentioned, the regime frames cell phone expansion as an example of expanded freedom under the leadership of Kim Jong-Un, but they are merely an additional way to repress and surveil the population for possible dissenters. Additionally, like China, North Korea has utilized cell phones as a means for facial recognition artificial intelligence software to advance surveillance upon its users.[36]

Contrarily, Chinese manufactured cell phones offer those with service access, typically along the North Korea-China border, with unrestricted internet capabilities, digital downloads, and international calling to friends and family located in China and South Korea.[37] While the regime does have the capability to prevent connecting to Chinese networks, due to scale this is impossible to enforce around the clock. The regime deploys

[35] Source: Slavney and Williams.

[36] Lim, "Digital Joseon," 89.

[37] Joon Ho Kim and Joshua Lipes, "North Korea Shuts Down Illegal Cell Phone Access to Chinese Networks Amid Kim-Moon Summit," *Radio Free Asia News and Information*, September 20, 2018, https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/cellphones-09202018161614.html.

jammers and locators, however, to prevent connection to Chinese networks and to enforce its strict laws prohibiting foreign media.[38] Chinese cell phone users in North Korea are often smugglers who coordinate business with counterparts across the border. To supplement its jamming and locator equipment, the regime also spies on calls listening for information to warrant prosecution of violators.[39] Again, since connectivity to Chinese networks is limited to only certain areas along the border, it is easier to narrow down surveillance areas for enforcement.

Removable media devices such as USB drives and SD cards have significantly increased in the past decade gradually replacing such other means as CDs, cassettes, and radio sets. The growing demand for these devices is mostly attributable to their small size, which allows for easier concealment from authorities and random inspections. Electronics purchased on the secondary market, often consisting of Chinese television sets, cell phones and portable media players, are also able to support the devices directly, making access far easier.[40]

Several non-governmental organizations utilize USB drives and SD cards to funnel outside information into North Korea with the goal of exposing citizens to outside society, though the language gap sometimes interferes with this goal.[41] External radio broadcasters and non-governmental organizations, however, attempt to mitigate the language and cultural barrier by specifically tailoring content with easy to understand, general material.[42] The most common content on these devices is typically depictions of pop culture like U.S., Chinese, and South Korean TV shows and movies, as well as educational

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[38] Kim and Lipes, "North Korea Shuts Down Illegal Cell Phone Access to Chinese Networks Amid Kim-Moon Summit."

[39] Joon Ho Kim and Joshua Lipes, "North Korea Expands Jamming, Surveillance of Chinese Cell Phones," *Radio Free Asia News and Information*, July 3, 2014, https://libproxy.nps.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.nps.edu/reports/north-korea-expands-jamming-surveillance-chinese/docview/1543337864/se-2?accountid=12702.

[40] Yonho Kim, "Foreign Media into North Korea: Finding Synergy between Pop Culture and Tailored Content," 38 North, November 29, 2016, https://www.38north.org/2016/11/ykim112916/.

[41] Kim, "Foreign Media into North Korea: Finding Synergy between Pop Culture and Tailored Content,"

[42] Kim.

programs.[43] Additionally, USB drives and SD cards are easy to duplicate or transfer files through, which has led to a sort of normalization of foreign entertainment.[44] More than half of the population is believed to have viewed foreign media at this point, and although enforcement of the laws prohibiting this content is variable, the content cannot be unseen.[45] Aside from digital media viewing, USB drives and SD cards also provide a platform for discreet information sharing, an ability that other technologies do not offer because of the regime's surveillance tactics.[46] It is difficult to accurately estimate true usage of USB drives and SD cards because of their hand-to-hand shareability, but their use may well continue growing as the safest platform for illicit media viewing.

While cell phones, USB drives, and SD cards are outpacing the market, the traditional radio remains a reliable source of outside information for the average North Korean. Like most items manufactured in North Korean factories, domestically produced radio sets are controlled by the state. These radios only tune to a handful of state-sponsored channels, often containing content that idealizes or aggrandizes the Kim family, while denigrating South Korea and the United States.[47] Though illegal, these domestically produced radios are often modified to receive radio transmission from across the southern border and Western-sponsored channels that aim to inform North Koreans about the outside world.[48] One way around the non-tunable radios is to purchase Chinese radios on the secondary market. These can receive outside transmissions without modifications.[49] Additionally, North Koreans typically find the information contained in radio broadcasts

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[43] Kim, "Foreign Media into North Korea: Finding Synergy between Pop Culture and Tailored Content,"

[44] Daniel Tudor and James Pearson, "Leisure Time in North Korea," in *North Korea Confidential: Private Markets, Fashion Trends, Prison Camps, Dissenters, and Defectors* (Rutland, Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, n.d.), 47–56.

[45] Tudor and Pearson, "Leisure Time in North Korea," 48–56.

[46] Tudor and Pearson, 47–56.

[47] Kretchun, Lee, and Tuohy, "Compromising Connectivity: Information Dynamics Between the State and Society in a Digitizing North Korea," 9–16.

[48] Kretchun, Lee, and Tuohy, 9–16.

[49] Daniel Tudor and James Pearson, "Communications," in *North Korea Confidential: Private Markets, Fashion Trends, Prison Camps, Dissenters and Defectors* (Rutland, Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, n.d.), 156–160.

more reliable and trustworthy than the television shows and movies they view on other media platforms because of radio's news-focused content.[50] The audience for foreign-sponsored radio broadcasts might thus be more likely to express dissent, whether internally or otherwise. Foreign radio broadcasts are also one of the most challenging media sources for the government to crack down on, making them a uniquely reliable source of outside information.[51]

Finally, one of the oldest forms of propaganda infiltration from the United States and South Korea into North Korea is through leaflets or balloons. This method dates back to the Korean War and has long enraged the DPRK, likely due to the difficulty of countering them. North Korean leadership has often reacted to them with threats of violence and reduced diplomatic cooperation, framing the dropping of anti-DPRK leaflets as an act of aggression.[52] Leaflets produce vehement disapproval from the North Korean leadership, to the point that the Moon Jae-In administration made sending leaflets over the border illegal.[53] While early versions of leaflets mainly contained simple anti-DPRK propaganda messages, modern ones have a vast array of contents including dollar bills, USB drives, and transistor radios.[54] Despite the ban on leaflets in South Korea, it remains difficult to combat them and track their origin. Quantifying the success rate of leaflets is also infeasible, but defectors have attested to the efficacy of this information propagation technique.[55]

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[50] Tudor and Pearson, "Communications," 156–160.

[51] Kim, "Foreign Media into North Korea: Finding Synergy between Pop Culture and Tailored Content."

[52] Dirk Godder, "North Korea Threatens South with Revenge over Leaflet Campaign," *DPA International*, June 13, 2020, https://libproxy.nps.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.nps.edu/wire-feeds/north-korea-threatens-south-with-revenge-over/docview/2412562543/se-2?accountid=12702.

[53] Jason Strother, "Seoul Bans Anti-North Korea Leaflet Drops," *Voice of America News*, December 15, 2020, https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific_seoul-bans-anti-north-korea-leaflet-drops/6199586.html.

[54] Baek, "Old School' Media: From Trader Gossip to Freedom Balloons," 95–96, 102–104.

[55] Baek, 95–95, 102–104.

D. HOW THE REGIME COUNTERS INFORMATION FLOW

A nation built on genuine loyalty to its founder Kim Il-Sung has long also relied on other means to counter narratives of outside information. Outside information was far less common under Kim Il-Sung, though, so tactics like domestic propaganda and the *inminban* system of neighborhood-based monitoring were effectively the primary tactics to ensure allegiance to the state. Kim Il-Sung instilled die-hard allegiance to the state by promoting himself through national newspapers, requiring his portrait in every household, and erecting statues of himself throughout the DPRK.[56] These early initiatives indoctrinated the North Korean populace to the state ideology ahead of technological advances that would later infiltrate the state. Kim Il-Sung essentially countered future information flow by creating a personality cult that resonated long after his death in the 1990s.[57]

But after Kim Il-Sung's death, the strict reliance on indoctrination and *juche* ideology to counter the impact of outside information flow was degraded. The monopoly on information was lost during the famine years under Kim Jong-Il, leading to an increased reliance on brutality and corruption to counter the contents of outside information.[58] Once it regained control of the nationwide famine, the government began reasserting itself. In the early-2000s, Kim Jong-Il began to dedicate more resources to target and prosecute the sale, possession, and use of foreign illicit media.

More generally, as would become a common trend in North Korea, initial influxes of information were eventually followed by temporary crackdowns -- not only on cell phones, but also on private trade and the possession of illegal contraband.[59] These crackdowns included increased monitoring along the China-North Korea border and regular unannounced inspections of homes and personnel on public transit with a focus on

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[56] Fyodor Tertitskiy, "The Ascension of the Ordinary Man: How the Personality Cult of Kim Il-Sung Was Constructed (1945-1974)," *Acta Koreana* 18, no. 1 (2015): 226, https://doi-org.libproxy.nps.edu/10.18399/acta.2015.18.1.008.

[57] Tertitskiy, "The Ascension of the Ordinary Man: How the Personality Cult of Kim Il-Sung Was Constructed (1945-1974)."

[58] Kretchun, Lee, and Tuohy, "Compromising Connectivity: Information Dynamics Between the State and Society in a Digitizing North Korea," 2.

[59] Lankov, *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia,* 34–36.

locating illegal media, specifically that coming from South Korea.[60] Kim Jong-Il's punishment policy was situation dependent, but included periodic purges of high-ranking government officials, in addition to sentencing to re-education or labor camps for offenders. Kim Jong-Il also expanded North Korea's Military Security Command (MSC) to support surveillance of its people at the provincial and city levels, targeting disloyal citizens potentially engaged in plots to overthrow the regime.[61] In North Korea, particularly before the evolution of technology, the onus for surveillance was largely on the individual. Also established was Surveillance Bureau Group 109 is one of North Korea's most notorious enforcements units for information repression.[62] Group 109 functions as both a surveillance and enforcement apparatus of the government, focusing on illicit possession of media through all means like USBs, DVDs, and cell phones, and monitoring North Korean-produced cell phones for suspicious activity like file exchanges or transfers.[63] To supplement his MSC and Surveillance Bureau 109, and to minimize word-of-mouth information spread, Kim Jong-Il emphasized the *inminban* system, which employed a neighborhood watch system to monitor for anti-regime rhetoric.[64]

In 2020, Kim Jong-Un implemented the Law on the Elimination of Reactionary Thought and Culture to disincentivize his citizens from participating in illegal information sharing and possession, specifically aiming at information that depicts South Korean culture.[65] Under this law, punishment is harsh, with simple possession of material garnering five to 15 years in prison. Those involved in distribution face punishment by death.[66] Public executions and purges of potential dissenters close to Kim Jong-Un have

60 Gause, *Coercion, Control, Surveillance, and Punishment,* 6–7, 55.

61 Gause, 36–41.

62 Seohee Kwak, "Is South Korean Culture a Threat to North Korea?," *The Diplomat*, December 17, 2021, https://thediplomat.com/2021/12/is-south-korean-culture-a-threat-to-north-korea/.

63 Kretchun, Lee, and Tuohy, "Compromising Connectivity: Information Dynamics Between the State and Society in a Digitizing North Korea," 26–27.

64 Gause, 42–48.

65 Kwak, "Is South Korean Culture a Threat to North Korea?"

66 Gabriela Bernal, "N. Korean Authorities Using New Law to Crackdown on Spread of South Korean Content | Daily NK," May 31, 2021, https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korean-authorities-using-new-law-to-crackdown-on-spread-of-south-korean-content/.

become commonplace, as statistics suggest both have increased since he assumed power in 2012.[67] Executions often occur in public where an audience is present to witness the consequences of anti-regime rhetoric or actions with former U.S. United Nations ambassador testifying that all citizens 12 and older are required to view public executions for the same reason.[68]As with nuclear weapons tests, Kim Jong-Un's enforcement of these laws tends to occur during and after highly publicized foreign engagements, such as his two meetings with former U.S. president Donald Trump.[69] The regime likely cracks down during these time periods to sway the narrative of engagement in favor of North Korea, because the population is so indoctrinated to view the U.S. as an evil entity. State media frames these crackdowns as countering "anti-socialist behavior."[70] This law, along with the threat of random household and personal inspections by Group 109, are all critical pieces of the regime's policy of information deterrence. In other words, the regime relies on scare tactics to force policy adherence, rather than regime loyalty alone.

Moreover, North Korea has taken advantage of the growth in information technology to further surveil and repress its citizens. The regime does not allow access until it can ensure its use as a means to restrict and surveil platforms in order to embolden rather than weaken the regime. Thus, the regime gains a new way to oppress its citizens, presented under the guise of technological advancement as a benefit. The state established its own internal intranet, called *Kwangmyong,* in 2000, as an attempt to reap the economic and technological benefits of on-line activity while maintaining control of the content its users can access.[71] The intranet contains mostly propaganda, with sites that are pre-

[67] "North Korea Stages Public Executions to Strengthen 'Social Order,'" Radio Free Asia, accessed May 17, 2023, https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/executions-04102019175353.html. "Report: Kim Jong Un Has Purged a Confirmed 421 Officials," Radio Free Asia, accessed May 17, 2023, https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/nksc-purge-02222019182245.html.

[68] "North Korea Stages Public Executions to Strengthen 'Social Order.'"

[69] Benjamin Katzeff Silberstein, "How High-Tech Can Boost Regime Stability in North Korea," *Orbis* 64, no. 4 (n.d.): 589–98, https://www-sciencedirect-com.libproxy.nps.edu/science/article/pii/S0030438720300478?via%3Dihub.

[70] Silberstein, "How High-Tech Can Boost Regime Stability in North Korea."

[71] Johannes Gerschewski and Alexander Dukalskis, "How the Internet Can Reinforce Authoritarian Regimes: The Case of North Korea," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 19 (2018): 12–19, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26567522.

bookmarked to allow users access to content legitimizing the regime.[72] Full-scale internet access is virtually nonexistent, except for a few elites close to the Kim family who have access to e-mail, website browsing, and so on, and it is used as a bargaining chip in few cases as a reward for loyalty.[73] Similarly, as previously mentioned, indigenously manufactured cell phones are limited in their capabilities and incapable of international calling. The government has also essentially wiretapped them, allowing for phone and text message surveillance to detect key words and phrases that indicate possible dissent.[74] These phrases include popular South Korean slang words, indicating likely exposure to or consumption of outside media.[75]

Beyond wiretapping and text message surveillance, the government has developed software called the "signature system," designed to automatically eliminate any illicit media from one's cell phone.[76] State-sponsored files and applications are digitally signed by the government, meaning all files imported from outside sources such as SD cards or received via text without a government signature are permanently deleted.[77] The signature system is employed on both North Korean manufactured cell phones and tablets.[78] Both devices will permanently save activity logs while randomly screenshotting the device; neither action can be reversed or deleted.[79] Files are also watermarked to delineate the origin and recipient of illicit material.[80] This component is a key enforcement tool, as

[72] Gerschewski and Dukalskis, "How the Internet Can Reinforce Authoritarian Regimes: The Case of North Korea," 16.

[73] Gerschewski and Dukalskis, 16.

[74] Silberstein, "How High-Tech Can Boost Regime Stability in North Korea," 596–597.

[75] Martyn Williams, "Digital Trenches: North Korea's Information Counter-Offensive" (Washington, D.C.: Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2019), 12, 34, https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Williams_Digital_Trenches_Web_FINAL.pdf.

[76] Nat Kretchun, "The Regime Strikes Back: A New Era of North Korean Information Controls – 38 North: Informed Analysis of North Korea," 38 North, June 9, 2017, https://www.38north.org/2017/06/nkretchun060917/.

[77] Kretchun, "The Regime Strikes Back: A New Era of North Korean Information Controls – 38 North: Informed Analysis of North Korea."

[78] Silberstein, "How High-Tech Can Boost Regime Stability in North Korea," 597.

[79] Silberstein, 597.

[80] Silberstein, 597.

distribution of foreign media is typically punished more harshly than simple possession.[81] As noted above, cell phone networks are susceptible to jamming, as are radio broadcasts that originate from outside of North Korea. Denying service is easy. In regard to Chinese cell phones, however, denying service for Chinese cell phones is trickier but possible with strategic jamming.[82] A major limitation to strategic jamming is the amount of electricity that it requires, so the regime mainly engages in this during select events like summits or diplomatic outreach in order to control related narratives.[83]

As technology usage grows incrementally, surveillance and censorship techniques like these are impossible to enforce across the board. The techniques do act as a deterrent for those considering the illicit use of their devices because of harsh potential punishments that include prison time, re-education camps, a decrease in *songbun* status, or death. Further, since these items are permanently saved, it gives the government ammunition to prosecute a person of interest if involved in other illicit activities. On balance, while Kim Jong-Un presents technological advancements and modernization within North Korea as a newfound freedom to his people, he is actually using these to counter information growth and to embolden his own security.

E. CONCLUSION

Today, it would be no exaggeration to suggest that the majority of North Koreans have accessed some sort of illicit information about the outside world, whether through radio broadcasts, USB drives, cell phones, or word of mouth. Trust circles are small, but the evolution of technology has enabled faster transfer of data, making it more difficult to attribute or prosecute each and every individual offender. That said, whether there has been an impact is a separate question altogether. This will be addressed in the concluding chapter. That said, information and technological advancements have likely had little, or the opposite intended effect. Though people are aware that life in South Korea is more

[81] Bernal, "N. Korean Authorities Using New Law to Crackdown on Spread of South Korean Content | Daily NK."

[82] Kretchun, Lee, and Tuohy, "Compromising Connectivity: Information Dynamics Between the State and Society in a Digitizing North Korea," 71.

[83] Tudor and Pearson, "Communications," 156–159.

prosperous, the United States may not be full of bastards, and the regime may lie from time to time, repressive tactics remain convincing enough to deter public dissent. Information and information technology likely provide an improved quality of daily life for the average person by breaking up the monotony of and distracting the mind from the realities of life, but they have not had the intended effect of destabilizing the regime. Ultimately information alone will not suffice in leading a revolution in North Korea, though in the distant long term, it might contribute. Information access is just one step toward the broader goal of reform in North Korea.

III. THE IMPACT OF THE SECONDARY ECONOMY ON REGIME STABILITY

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea initially differentiated itself from the Republic of Korea as a self-proclaimed socialist paradise, superior to its American-supported neighbor. Initially Kim Il-Sung's system did prove superior. However, it would later devolve into a state unofficially propped up by an extensive network of emerging capitalists. Secondary markets are common in developing nations, especially those that are socialist or communist in nature (i.e., the Soviet Union and China). What is unique about North Korea's secondary economy today, though, is the extent to which it is relied upon. As a step toward assessing its impact on regime stability, this chapter will establish how the North Korean economy evolved into one reliant upon informal markets, markets' effect on the social hierarchy, and how the regime has cracked down on this activity in the past.

A. ECONOMY BACKGROUND

Following Japan's decolonization of the Korean peninsula in 1945, the communist North, led by the Soviet-sponsored Kim Il-Sung, possessed most sources of economic prosperity. This included 76% of mining production capability, 80% of heavy industry capacity, and 92% of electricity generation capability, far outpacing the South.[84] Because of this capability, the national collectivization of farmland for the greater good of North Korea was well received by the people. During Kim Il-Sung's earliest years, the Chinese and Soviet satellite nation had an ample food supply, provided by the state through the socialist food-staple public distribution system and sponsored by over one billion dollars in foreign aid.[85] Kim Il-Sung evidently assumed the foreign aid was indefinite, given his disproportionate military spending and investment into heavy industry as opposed to agriculture.[86] Still, by most metrics North Korea was richer compared to South Korea, with

[84] Victor Cha, "The Best Days," in *The Impossible State: North Korea, Past and Future*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 2018), 22.

[85] Victor Cha, "Five Bad Decisions," in *The Impossible State*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 2018), 112–113.

[86] Cha, "Five Bad Decisions," 112–113.

a superior gross domestic product per capita until the mid-1960s.[87] South Korea's economy subsequently doubled North Korea's within a decade, while Kim Il-Sung's averaged a slight increase.[88] Boosted by continuous economic aid from both the Soviet Union and China, North Korea's economy remained relatively stable through the 1980s.[89] But unbeknownst to North Koreans, Kim Il-Sung's economic ignorance, prioritization of military spending, and unreliable borrowing set up his son Kim Jong-Il for catastrophic repercussions.

North Korea's official economy significantly deteriorated almost immediately following Kim Jong-Il's assumption of power. The crumbling economy was the sum of years of poor decision-making by Kim Il-Sung's regime that gradually stripped the nation's infrastructure of its ability to meet specific thresholds for the staple-food public distribution system. As soon as Kim Jong-Il rose to power, North Korea's agricultural sector was decimated by massive flooding and an inability to produce necessary electricity, fuel, and fertilizer to feed the greater population.[90] By 1996, roughly two years after Kim Jong-Il took over, the state was producing about half the food necessary to maintain the public distribution system and the regime's own legitimacy as a socialist paradise.[91]

Kim Jong-Il's regime exacerbated the issue further, following suit with a series of policy failures. While his country was in crisis, facing a famine that would eventually kill upwards of two million North Koreans by some estimates, Kim Jong-Il continued to prioritize spending toward his own survival.[92] Aside from imports of luxury consumer goods, Kim Jong-Il followed a *songun*, or military-first, style of economic development.[93]

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[87] Byung-Yeon Kim, "Performance of the North Korean System," in *Unveiling the North Korean Economy: Collapse and Transition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 81.

[88] Kim, "Performance of the North Korean System," 81.

[89] Cha, "Five Bad Decisions," 112–117, 121–125.

[90] Andrei Lankov, "Two Decades of Crisis," in *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 90–99.

[91] Lankov, "Two Decades of Crisis," 90–99.

[92] Lankov, 90–99.

[93] Jongseok Woo, "Songun Politics and the Political Weakness of the Military in North Korea: An Institutional Account," *Problems of Post-Communism* 63, no. 4 (2016): 253–62, https://doi-org.libproxy.nps.edu/10.1080/10758216.2016.1145065.

In other words, instead of investing in his people's survival, Kim Jong-Il invested in a million-man military and a nuclear weapons arsenal, a policy that his son would later adopt. The United States, South Korea, Japan, and other organizations offered economic aid and food shipments for denuclearization during the famine years, but Kim Jong-Il refused. In October 1994, North Korea agreed to the Agreed Framework deal with the United States, which would have sent economic aid, oil, and the construction of light-water reactors for power generation.[94] Kim Jong-Il continued to proliferate nuclear weapons and the deal was nixed shortly thereafter when this was publicly revealed.[95] When food aid did manage to enter North Korea, the majority of it was siphoned off to feed the elites and military rather than the bulk of the state's starving population, despite rumors circulating among the masses that aid was on its way.[96]

When Kim Jong-Un assumed office in 2012, some North Korea watchers suspected economic reform in the form of further global or regional expansion would potentially follow, as the young leader was Europe-educated and a fan of sports and Western culture.[97] In other words, Kim Jong-Un was the most globalized of the Kim dynasty. The rationale behind this thought was North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons would ensure Kim's security on an international scale, allowing the state to open itself up to outside trade.[98] Roughly a decade later, this speculated economic reform has yet to occur, with Kim Jong-Un continuing much of the military- and regime-survival policies that both his father and grandfather pioneered. A critical piece of these policies remains turning a blind eye to the secondary economy that has turned the official socialist state into an unofficial capitalistic state.

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[94] IAEA, "Agreed Framework of 21 October 1994 between the United States of America and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea" (International Atomic Energy Agency, November 2, 1994), https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/KP%20US_941021_Agreed%20Framework%20between%20the%20US%20and%20DPRK.pdf.

[95] Eleanor Albert and Lindsay Maizland, "Timeline: North Korean Nuclear Negotiations," *Council on Foreign Relations*, February 2, 2023, https://www.cfr.org/timeline/north-korean-nuclear-negotiations.

[96] Barbara Demick, "The Good Die First," in *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2010), 146.

[97] Hong Yung Lee, "North Korea in 2012: Kim Jong Un's Succession," *Asian Survey* 53, no. 1 (February 2013): 177–178, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/as.2013.53.1.176.

[98] Yung Lee, "North Korea in 2012: Kim Jong Un's Succession," 177–178.

While this may seem counterintuitive, since the secondary economy emerged and is sustained by illegal trade with China and other outside entities, *juche* ideology has remained at the forefront of the state's rationale for opposing economic reform.[99] Opening the state's official economy up to globalization and official trade with other countries directly undermines this ideology of self-reliance. Additionally, since its inception, the state has preached that the strength of the regime lies in its ability to provide for its people, even though this has not been the case in several decades. Openly admitting this, however, would potentially delegitimize the regime, which could have domestically destabilizing effects. In Kim Jong-Un's early years in power, the state gradually attempted to prime the public to the idea of economic reform, and how outside trade would still fall in line with *Juche*. The regime claimed trade with other countries, even non-socialist ones, was also in support of *juche* ideology as long blind reliance and contractual obligations did not emerge from these interactions.[100] The Kims have shown themselves to be aware of the advantages that might accompany potential reform, particularly in such a downtrodden nation as North Korea, so it is unsurprising that Kim Jong-Un attempted to spin this early on while maintaining the lens of the *juche* mindset. However, the regime later backtracked on these ideas.[101] All three Kim regimes' biggest fear in connection with economic reform has been allowing outside influence and ideas to penetrate the "hermit kingdom," which might ultimately lead to pressure for liberalization. This was observed, critically, during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the regime appears to have tried to reel in any liberalization of the economy and access to outside information.[102]

B. SECONDARY ECONOMY BACKGROUND

Because the 1990s famine stripped North Korea of its ability to provide for the people, the people were forced to improvise, and the secondary economy emerged as a

[99] Robert Carlin and Rachel Minyoung Lee, "Understanding Kim Jong-Un's Economic Policymaking: Juche and Foreign Trade," *38North*, February 16, 2023, sec. Economy, https://www.38north.org/2023/02/understanding-kim-jong-uns-economic-policymaking-juche-and-foreign-trade/.

[100] Carlin and Minyoung Lee, "Understanding Kim Jong-Un's Economic Policymaking: Juche and Foreign Trade."

[101] Carlin and Minyoung Lee.

[102] Carlin and Minyoung Lee.

result. "Improvising" meant stealing, bartering, and engaging in illicit market activities to ensure survival. Kim Il-Sung's de-privatization of land and agriculture and strict rules banning private enterprise for profit were gradually undone amid the establishment of the secondary economy.

Upon inception, North Korea's secondary economy was not what it is today. At first the illicit market mainly consisted of foodstuffs to supplement the minimal rations each individual was provided by the government. Due to its deeply socialist roots, the North Korean population had been reliant on the state's Public Distribution System (PDS) as its primary source of food and other basic household needs. The PDS met its demise in the 1990s when the government was unable to fulfill its distribution promises due to widespread flooding that destroyed most of North Korea's rice crops and a rollback of Chinese supplied foods.[103] As a result, the secondary economy was originally a means to acquire items such as grains, vegetables, clothes, etc., to supplement the insufficient amount distributed by the government.[104]

Eventually, the market included more items such as clothing from China, illicit media, and even real estate.[105] Today, there are some marketplaces officially sanctioned by the government, dispersed sporadically throughout North Korea, as depicted in Figure 3. These official markets are sustained through government taxation and operating fees, which the regime charges as a premium to remain a legal operation.[106] Within and outside of these official markets also exist the black markets that function without official kickbacks to the government and often include the sales of illegal products and information technology.[107]

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[103] Michael J. Seth, "North Korea in Recent Years," in *A Concise History of Modern Korea: From the Late Nineteenth Century to the Present* (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., n.d.), 213–37.

[104] Byung-Yeon Kim, "Households: Surviving in Informal Markets," in *Unveiling the North Korean Economy: Collapse and Transition* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 91–92.

[105] Andrei Lankov, "Who Works in North Korea's Private Sector?," *NKNews.Org*, April 26, 2016, https://www.nknews.org/2016/04/who-works-in-north-koreas-private-sector/.

[106] Victor Cha and Lisa Collins, "The Markets: Private Economy and Capitalism in North Korea?," *Beyond Parallel*, August 26, 2018, https://beyondparallel.csis.org/markets-private-economy-capitalism-north-korea/.

[107] Cha and Collins, "The Markets: Private Economy and Capitalism in North Korea?."

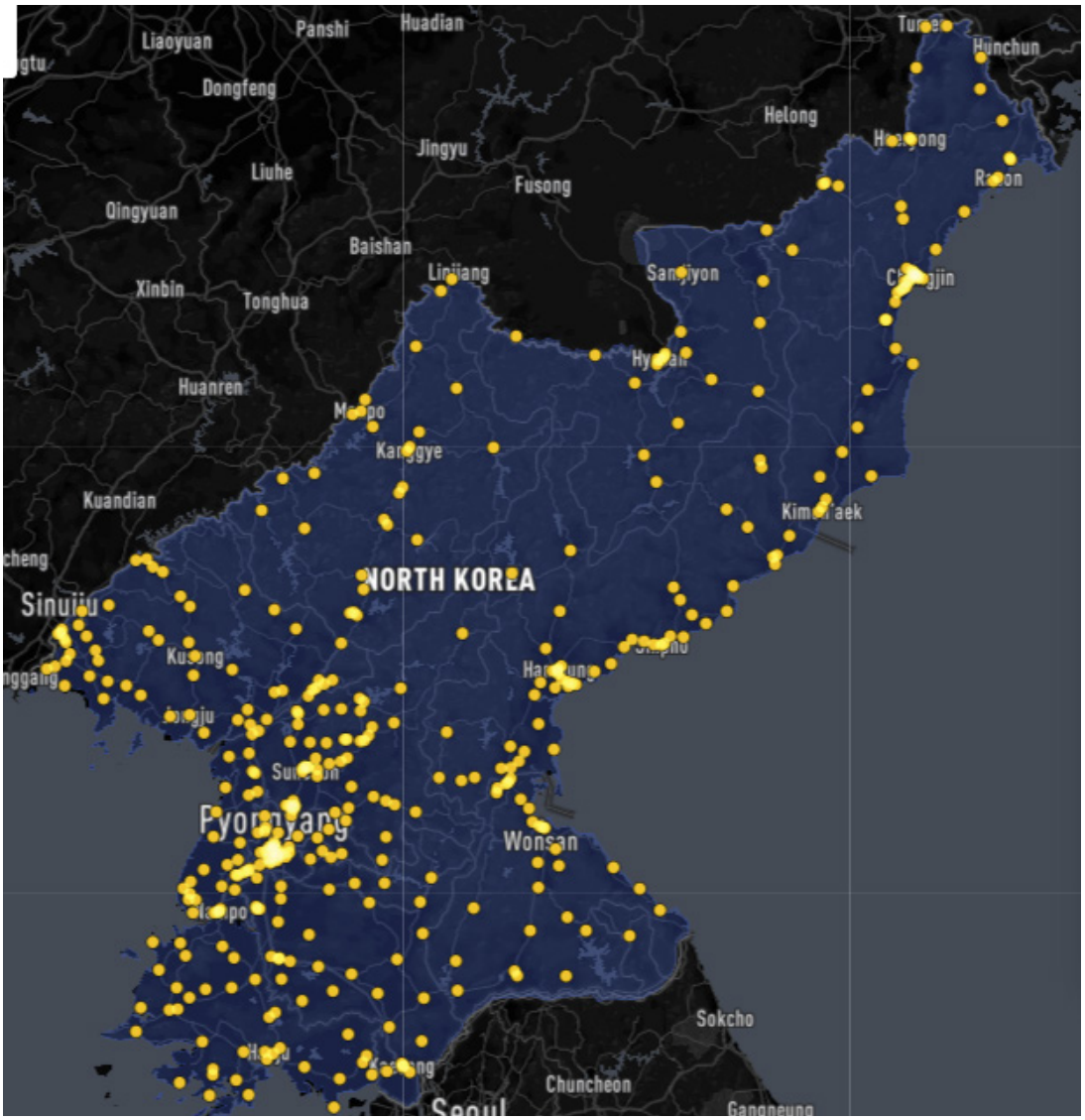

Figure 3. Locations of Officially Sanctioned Markets in North Korea[108]

The source of these goods varies geographically, ranging from illegal smuggling from China to illicit agricultural plots in rural areas and siphoning off of state-owned factories.[109] Depending on availability in one's geographic location, certain goods hold more value in different areas. This has led merchants to travel with their goods to sell in an alternate region for a profit, where they will purchase more rarities and continue the cycle.

[108] Cha and Collins.

[109] Andrei Lankov, "Two Decades of Crisis," in *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 82–86.

Most items (approximately 85 percent) produced domestically for the informal markets are indeed food, alcohol, and clothing, while the illicit materials that are sold in these markets are smuggled across the border from China and then redistributed throughout the country via the sellers.[110] For example, some items, especially consumer electronics and illicit media, are more difficult to come by deeper into the country. So, smugglers will sell their products to buyers who live near the border, who will then travel domestically to locations that will garner higher prices for the illegal goods.[111] This market tactic also applies to food items that are more localized to certain areas in North Korea.[112] Whereas private plots of crops were strictly prohibited prior to the famine years, they now provide a portion of the food sold on the markets, in addition to some skimmed off from state and foreign aid allocations.[113]

The regime's approach to the secondary economy was black-and-white prior to the famine: anyone found conducting illicit trading was prosecuted.[114] Large-scale prosecution was largely possible due to constant surveillance through government emplaced networks and mandatory permits for travel outside of one's town (traveling outside of one's locale to take advantage of comparative trade advantages, for example, requires a permit).[115] But the system has evolved into one of tacit acceptance, one on which roughly 35% of North Koreans rely exclusively as their only source of food,

110 Kim, "Households: Surviving in Informal Markets," 104; Alexander Dukalskis, "North Korea's Shadow Economy: A Force for Authoritarian Resilience or Corrosion?," *Europe Asia Studies* 68, no. 3 (May 2016), https://web-s-ebscohost-com.libproxy.nps.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=0&sid=d4e30898-1900-4ca5-983e-ae83d75573ad%40redis.

111 Barbara Demick, "Mothers of Invention," in *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2010), 147–59.

112 Dukalskis, "North Korea's Shadow Economy: A Force for Authoritarian Resilience or Corrosion?," 495.

113 Dukalskis, 495.

114 Andrei Lankov, "The Society Kim Il Sung Built and How He Did It," in *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 34–35.

115 Lankov, "The Society Kim Il Sung Built and How He Did It," 37–40.

sustained by bribery and corruption.[116] One study, conducted amongst a group of defectors, found that over 90% of participants viewed engaging in corruption or criminal activity and the secondary market as the easiest ways to make money in North Korea.[117] Enforcement of the illegal market activity is found to often wax and wane depending on the regime's perceived strength.

At its height, presumably in the pre-COVID years, people relied more on the secondary economy for income and nourishment than the state, and they also participated more in the secondary economy than North Korea's official economy.[118] High end estimates say that upwards of 50 percent of the DPRK's gross domestic product comes from the private sector.[119] Participation in the secondary economy outpaces participation in the official economy, with roughly 70 percent participation versus 50 percent, respectively.[120] Most defector surveys indicate this gap is due to a drastic difference in earnings, as the income on the secondary market is estimated to be as much as 80 times higher than state employment, and women's ability to participate.[121] Along with the potential for more wages, there is also a significant reliance on the secondary economy rather than the state for food.[122]

The secondary economy is predominantly sustained by middle-aged women, because they are less likely to be mandated by the government to seek state employment.[123] Men who operate on the secondary economy usually have to pay bribes

116 Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, "Reform from below: Behavioral and Institutional Change in North Korea," *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 73, no. 2 (February 1, 2010): 133–52, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2009.09.009; Andrei Lankov, "Changing North Korea: An Information Campaign Can Beat the Regime," *Foreign Affairs* 88, no. 6 (December 2009): 95–105, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20699718.

117 Haggard and Noland, "Reform from Below."

118 Yeo, *State, Society, and Markets in North Korea*, 35–36.

119 Lankov, "Who Works in North Korea's Private Sector?"

120 Yeo, 35–36.

121 Yeo, 35–36.

122 Yeo, 36.

123 Demick, "Mothers of Invention."

to their state employers to miss work, as this typically requires a valid excuse and permit signed by the employer.[124]

C. THE SECONDARY ECONOMY'S IMPACT ON ORDINARY CITIZENS

While the secondary economy has proven beneficial for the average citizen, particularly in times of crisis like the mid-1990s, it has also enabled massive corruption throughout all levels of society. The secondary economy emerged into mainstream life during the famine years when private markets were illegal, and violations were increasingly overlooked with a simple bribe because law enforcement was often just as desperate for food.[125] A bribe could garner a variety of concessions from the government, law enforcement, and peers. Defections were enabled by bribes of border guards, leniency in jail sentences could be bought with a bribe, the purchase and use of illegal media could often be enabled by bribes as well.[126] When the regime initially lost total control over the markets in the 1990s, it was forced to turn somewhat of a blind eye due to the public's desperation.[127] But once leadership regained somewhat of a foothold on feeding its people, Kim Jong-Il unsuccessfully attempted to reel the public back in. His efforts failed, however, mainly after currency reforms effectively seized most of the cash private marketeers had stored away.[128] Unheard-of levels of public outcry in response to the currency reforms eventually forced Kim Jong-Il's regime to backtrack, and the head of party finance at the time was executed.[129]

Early on, when the secondary economy was not as normalized, loyalty and belief in the regime caused apprehension in engaging in illicit market activities, even if one's

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[124] Barbara Demick, "Mothers of Invention."

[125] Demick, "The Good Die First."

[126] Lankov, "Two Decades of Crisis," 82–91.

[127] Andrei Lankov, "North Korea's Markets: A Brief History of Crackdowns and Tolerance," *NKNews.Org*, September 7, 2015, https://www.nknews.org/2015/09/north-koreas-markets-a-brief-history-of-crackdowns-and-tolerance/.

[128] Andrei Lankov, "The Logic of Survival (Domestically)," in *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 126–29.

[129] Lankov, "The Logic of Survival (Domestically)," 126–129.

family was near starvation.[130] The normalization of the markets, however, has since led most to choose engaging in the secondary economy over obeying the law against it. There is no doubt that the secondary economy has improved living standards in North Korea and provided relative peace of mind for many who now have the means to ensure minimum food necessities are met. Because of its illegitimacy, though, it subjects the wide swath of the population now heavily reliant on it to the regime's ever-evolving policies toward them. Without crackdowns, the average citizen relies on bribing just about everybody to ensure continuous market involvement. On a day-to-day basis, however, the average North Korean engaging in the informal markets is relatively left alone, dependent mostly on their location and magnitude of commercial activity. Random crackdowns aside, the average citizen can conduct business on a local level without much state intervention, paying the occasional bribe when necessary.[131]

D. THE SECONDARY ECONOMY'S IMPACT ON ENTREPRENEURS

One major advantage of capitalism is the ability to forge one's own path through private ownership and investment. This system paves the way for an elite class to possess power and make decisions mostly independent of the state. One of the most glaring differences in today's North Korean society is the emergence of such a hierarchy within the markets that exerts increasing control over those who are more casually involved in the secondary economy. This relatively new elite class of entrepreneurs is called the *donju*.[132] *Donju* accumulate wealth through a variety of means. Like entrepreneurs in Western capitalist societies, the *donju* acquire privatized businesses that specialize in production and supply, enabling the sustainability of the secondary markets.[133] Whereas the average North Korean in the late-1990s and early-2000s had to cross the Chinese border themselves to accumulate a stock of goods, *donju* minimize individual risk by providing goods

130 Demick, "The Good Die First."

131 Yeo, *State, Society, and Markets in North Korea*, 38.

132 Hyung-Seog Lee, "Economic Development of North Korea Through Expanding Marketization," *The Journal of East Asian Affairs* 32, no. 2 (2018): 89–90, https://libproxy.nps.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.nps.edu/scholarly-journals/economic-development-north-korea-through/docview/2220755432/se-2.

133 Lee, "Economic Development of North Korea Through Expanding Marketization," 89.

wholesale to individuals seeking to sell on the private markets. This is possible, in large part, due to North Korea's largely abandoned production infrastructure, including factories, mines, and warehouses. Much of this infrastructure was built and operated by the state, but during the famine years, much of it was closed and left behind. *Donju* acquired or leased the rights to these locations and equipment from the government for the purposes of production and wholesaling.[134] This, in turn, has created new jobs for North Koreans, usually with higher pay than state-sponsored jobs, thus also improving living standards and more deeply engraining unofficial markets into society.[135] *Donju* earn drastically more than average North Koreans. As of 2018, there were roughly a quarter million *donju* holding between 50,000 and 100,000 dollars, compared to yearly earnings of roughly 1,500 dollars per year for the average North Korean (including secondary economy wages).[136]

Donju have also ventured beyond the street markets into other ventures such as real estate and construction.[137] A similar model is followed in these ventures as well: leasing or purchasing state equipment for the purpose of home renovations or otherwise.[138]

The critical difference between Western capitalism and North Korean capitalism though, is that relevant laws and regulations do not exist in the DPRK. Private market activity is still illegal. This means workers and the elite are completely unprotected, subject to harsh work environments and sometimes even slave labor conditions.[139] As noted, the new elite class has widened the income gap in North Korea; and because privatized jobs pay more than the average unskilled North Korean laborer could ever dream to make

134 Lee, 92–93.

135 Lankov, "Who Works in North Korea's Private Sector?"

136 Jonathan Corrado, "Kim Jong-Un's Risky Economic Gambit," *38North*, April 2, 2021, sec. Economy, https://www.38north.org/2021/04/kim-jong-uns-risky-economic-gambit/; Kim, "Households: Surviving in Informal Markets."

137 Lankov, "Who Works in North Korea's Private Sector?"

138 Lankov.

139 Andrei Lankov, "Who Works in North Korea's Private Sector?."

through state employment, private-sector workers are willing to endure extremely unfavorable work conditions for the higher wages.[140]

One positive aspect of life in North Korea prior to the famine and emergence of the secondary economy was predictability. People knew exactly what was required of them and exactly what would get them into trouble with the government. The Kim Jong-Il period introduced uncertainty, and, worst of all, corruption and a style of governance that resembles organized crime. Many North Koreans are now employed by their former peers and by the growing *donju* class. Kim Jong-Un's regime has allowed this trend to occur because it benefits from kickbacks to the government, or profit skimming. Cash is now funneled into the regime on the backs of private labor, while an emerging wealthy class separates itself from the vast majority. This is the result of an illicit capitalist system within a socialist society because of the inherent unregulated nature of technically illegal commerce. Power is now even more concentrated in areas like Pyongyang, where the emerging rich now have a financial incentive to maintain the Kim regime's power.

E. HOW COVID-19 PANDEMIC IMPACTED NORTH KOREA'S ECONOMY

Kim Jong-Un has seemingly attempted to use the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to regain control over the informal markets through a variety of policies. Unlike the sudden currency reforms his father implemented, the pandemic offered an excuse for the regime to re-assert itself. Although gauging policy effectiveness in North Korea is difficult without first-hand defector accounts, one can assess that harsher punishments for cross-border smuggling and reinstituted domestic travel restrictions have potentially slowed down private market activity.[141] Because many sought-after goods on the private markets are foreign manufactured, predominantly in China, harsher crackdowns at the border could profoundly impact availability: COVID policy prompted more border enforcement than economic activity and migration themselves, which in earlier years could

[140] Robert E. McCoy, "Can the Spark of Capitalism Catch Fire in N. Korea?," *NKNews.Org*, June 14, 2016, https://www.nknews.org/2016/06/can-the-spark-of-capitalism-in-n-korea-catch-fire/.

[141] Daniel Wertz, "Can Kim Jong Un Use the Pandemic to Restore State Control Over the Economy?," *38North*, May 15, 2020, sec. Economy, https://www.38north.org/2020/05/dwertz051520/.

be evaded through bribery and due to relaxed enforcement.[142] North Korea locked down far longer than most countries: it returned to pre-pandemic conditions only recently, in mid-2023. Whereas goods produced from China were previously smuggled in across the border, Kim Jong-Un implemented a strict ban on this, reinforcing the border with barriers and armed guards ordered to shoot anyone approaching the border.[143]

Though the pandemic lockdowns were unplanned, they offered Kim a chance to test his boundaries. North Korea is not expected to retain the harsh physical measures it implemented during the lockdowns, but the COVID period both illustrated and reinforced Kim's ability to crack down on secondary markets at will with no known uprisings. Official and unofficial trade with China drastically declined, almost certainly destroying the secondary markets' inventory.[144] COVID-19 policies were a proof of concept, illustrating that the Kim regime could withstand prosecution of the secondary economy – that while the secondary economy has broadly replaced the official economy, the regime possesses the tools to dial it back when it deems necessary. That said, it is worth noting that the lack of trade caused North Korea's worst food shortage since the 1990s famine period under Kim Jong-Il, which were succeeded by arguably the regime's most unstable years.[145]

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[142] Daniel Wertz, "Can Kim Jong Un Use the Pandemic to Restore State Control Over the Economy?."

[143] "North Korea Officially Lifts Covid Restrictions, Allows Citizens to Travel Abroad: CORONAVIRUS NORTH KOREA," *EFE News Service*, August 27, 2023, https://libproxy.nps.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.nps.edu/wire-feeds/north-korea-officially-lifts-covid-restrictions/docview/2857506965/se-2?accountid=12702.

[144] Sukhee Han and Mason Richey, "North Korea in 2022: Mostly the Same, but More," *Asian Survey* 63, no. 2 (April 1, 2023): 242, https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2023.63.2.235.

[145] Lucas Rengifo-Keller, "Food Insecurity in North Korea Is at Its Worst Since the 1990s Famine," *38North*, January 19, 2023, https://www.38north.org/2023/01/food-insecurity-in-north-korea-is-at-its-worst-since-the-1990s-famine/#:~:text=Food%20availability%20has%20likely%20fallen,committed%20to%20its%20nuclear%20program.

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IV. FINAL ASSESSMENTS

Assessing the precise impact that increased information access and the secondary economy has had on the stability of Kim Jong-Un's regime is impossible due to the limited information we are able to access about the inner workings of North Korea. What this chapter will seek to accomplish, however, is to weigh the factors previously described against the information that we do possess from experts, defector accounts, and other known variables. This chapter will not predict when or if the Kim regime will collapse, but rather assess the level of strength it holds over the population. The overall assessment of this thesis is increased access to information and the growth of the secondary economy have had minimal impacts to the Kim regime's stability. This assessment is not intended to suggest that neither of these factors have played a role in eroding public trust in the regime, but rather that the regime has implemented policies that have successfully mitigated the effects so far. These mitigations are forms of repression and co-optation, time-adjusted to counter the evolving threats posed by both societal change and technological innovation. Both increased access to information and the secondary economy may still eventually play a role in destabilizing the regime in the long term.

A. CURRENT STATE OF THE REGIME

1. Defection Rates

Regime stability can be assessed in several ways. Figure 4 depicts defection numbers in North Korea over the past 22 years, by gender. Gender is relevant when assessing reasons for defection because of the different roles men and women play in North Korean society. As noted above, middle-aged women account for the majority of participation on the secondary markets, while official state employment is dominated by men.[146] With this in mind, it is no coincidence that defection numbers peaked amongst women in the latter half of Kim Jong-Il's regime, particularly in 2009 when he attempted to implement currency reforms. Much of the secondary economy's dealings are in paper

[146] Yeo, *State, Society, and Markets in North Korea*, 37.

currency, so devaluing the *won* essentially targeted middle-aged women who held large sums of unsanctioned cash.[147]

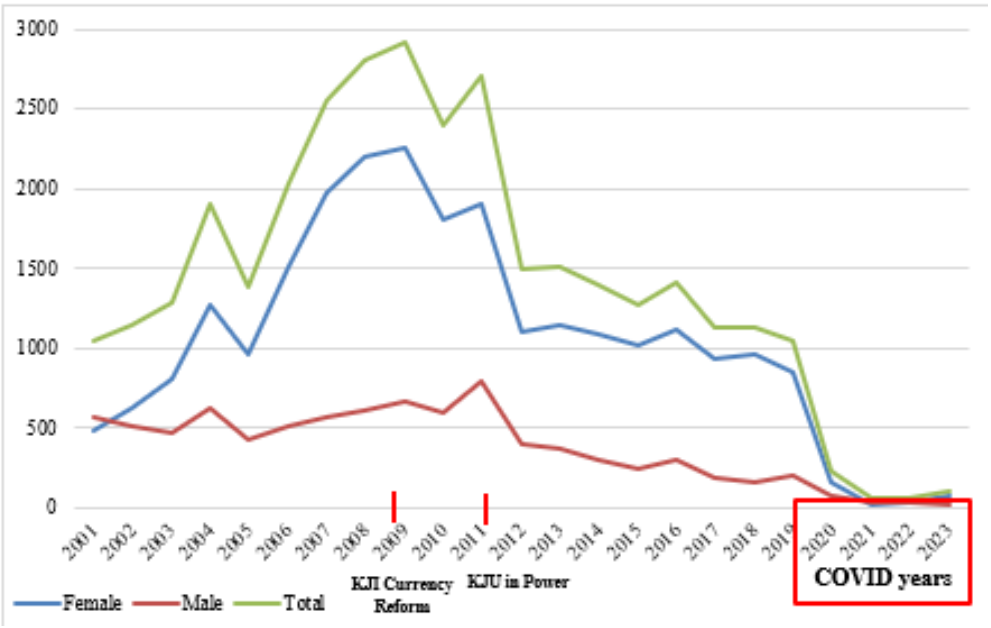

Figure 4. DPRK Defection Statistics by Gender[148]

Whereas Kim Il-Sung garnered seemingly unfettered support and adulation from his people, Kim Jong-Il's regime suffered in terms of buy-in amongst the masses. The poor economic conditions that ensued are reflected in the nearly linear increase in defections during Kim Jong-Il's time in in power, with an estimated 947 defections in 1998, reaching a peak in 2009 with 2,914 defections, and 2,706 during the year of his death in 2011.[149] During the few years preceding the 2009 reforms, Kim Jong-Il also implemented other policies to reel in the secondary economy after recovering from the late-90s famine.[150] Furthermore, defections were cut roughly in half when Kim Jong-Un succeeded his father

147 Lankov, "The Logic of Survival (Domestically)."

148 Adapted From: ROK Ministry of Unification, "Policy on North Korean Defectors," South-North Relations (South Korea: Ministry of Unification, n.d.), https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/relations/statistics/defectors/.

149 ROK Ministry of Unification, "Policy on North Korean Defectors."

150 Andrei Lankov, "The Logic of Survival (Domestically)," 119–123.

in 2011. This could partly be attributed to the idea of prospective economic reforms and liberalization under new leadership but was also likely a result of violent leadership purges and repression tactics. More directly, though, Kim Jong-Un's regime has emphasized a policy of fortifying North Korea's borders with a significant increase in security through physical means like armed guards and barbed wire fencing, and with surveillance cameras and mobile jamming equipment.[151] Since assuming power, Kim Jong-Un has steadily tightened his grip on societal control. As discussed in the previous chapter, defections drastically dropped off further during the COVID-19 years, as the regime enforced a near total lockdown of the country and enacted laws to consolidate its social control.[152] While this was an unusual degree of enforcement, it proved that regime is able and willing to assert its authoritarian power when it deems it necessary. The defection statistics do not stand alone as a measure of the regime's strength but are one indicator of the extreme level of control it continues to hold, one that has only grown more extreme amid information access and the expansion of the secondary economy.

2. Elite Reshuffles and Purges

Purges or leadership reshuffling are common in North Korea and are sometimes a signal of grievances within the ranks. This does not necessarily mean purges are an indicator of actual instability, but a sign that the regime is utilizing an internal method to reinforce itself from perceived threats. Purges are a mitigation tactic that can ultimately result in a more stable regime and are something all three Kim regimes have relied upon.[153] First, purges help the regime deflect blame for failed policies that pertain to public programs like nuclear weapons, the economy, or strength of domestic control.[154] Second,

[151] Peter Ward and Benjamin Katzeff Silberstein, "Strategies of Political Control under Kim Jong-Un: Understanding the Changing Mix of Containment, Repression, Co-Optation, and Coercive Distribution," *Asian Survey* 63, no. 4 (April 24, 2023): 567, https://doi-org.libproxy.nps.edu/10.1525/as.2023.1826437.

[152] Benjamin Katzeff Silberstein, "North Korea's 'Anti-Capitalist' Crackdown: Old Roots but New Vigor," *38North*, November 5, 2021, https://www.38north.org/2021/11/north-koreas-anti-capitalist-crackdown-old-roots-but-new-vigor/.

[153] Taekbin Kim, "Who Is Purged? Determinants of Elite Purges in North Korea," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 54, no. 3 (September 2021): 77–79, https://doi.org/10.1525/j.postcomstud.2021.54.3.73.

[154] Kim, "Who Is Purged? Determinants of Elite Purges in North Korea," 77–79.

purges might occur randomly to project unpredictability upon those in power in an effort to ensure loyalty through fear.[155] Third, purges could also signal emerging trouble surrounding the regime due to perceived dissent from the elite.[156] In North Korea, purging of government officials could mean a simple reorganization, removal from one's post entirely, or, sometimes, removal by execution. No one in North Korea, except for Chairman Kim himself, is exempt from purges. This was exemplified by Kim Jong-Un's ordered assassination of both his half-brother Kim Jong-Nam and his uncle Jang Song-Thaek. For this reason, reshuffling and purging of government elites can be used as a factor in weighing the regime's current self-assessment of its stability. If coinciding with a known policy that tanked, it is reasonable to assume that Kim himself is acknowledging the policy's failure (though not responsibility for the failure). Though this does not necessarily mean those around him or even citizens are likely to conduct a *coup d'etat*, Kim typically attempts to reel in perceived threats like information access and the secondary economy during times of assessed instability. The regime likely uses this formula to recalibrate society as a whole, re-instilling fear and causing those who might decide to act against the regime to second guess themselves. The effectiveness of Kim's purging tactics is evident, at least, in the simple fact that he remains in power today, with no known attempts to overthrow him from within the elite governmental ranks. As North Korea slowly re-opens itself following ironclad COVID-19 lockdowns that caused a likely food shortage reminiscent of the infamous 1990s famine, a potential purge or reshuffling is possible if Kim's regime feels criticized for its failed policies.

3. Absence of Protests and Political Movements

No known mass movements, localized protests, or even scattered protests have occurred in North Korea, with the exception of one instance in 2009 in response to Kim Jong-Il's attempt at currency reforms. Unlike other hard authoritarian countries like China, Syria, or Iran, where protests against ruling regimes do occur, these remain unheard of in

[155] Eleanor Albert, "North Korea's Power Structure," *Council on Foreign Relations*, June 17, 2020, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/north-koreas-power-structure.

[156] Kim, 77–79.

North Korea. Though the regime might not release information if movements of any kind did occur, defector accounts alluding to protests or mass movements also remain nonexistent – again, with currency-reform protest during the Kim Jong-Il era remaining the notably isolated exception. This fact is almost certainly the most convincing argument indicating the regime's increasing – or, at least, stable – strength today. In comparison, protests occurred throughout Mao Zedong's brutal authoritarian rule over the People's Republic and have continued in each successive regime in China, including during the present administration of Xi Jinping.[157] In China, purges, executions, and political imprisonment do occur, like in North Korea, yet there clearly remains a platform to voice opinions and amass protests. Similarly, in other repressive authoritarian countries like Syria and Iran, anti-regime protests occur fairly regularly, despite the threat of the aforementioned consequences.[158] While protests in these specific countries have not led to alternative forms of government, the ability to amass movements and protests have proven critical aspects of eventual social and political change throughout history. The Arab Spring was initiated by a public movement, former Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu was overthrown by a mass movement, and former Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi's fate followed similar suit.[159] Each instance occurred under differing circumstances, but the critical commonality is the presence of a platform for protests and movements. This is perhaps the most glaring deficiency in North Korea for anyone hoping to identify weaknesses in the regime, particularly given the dire circumstances of the mid-1990s famine and the most recent famine during COVID-19, when anti-regime rhetoric would presumably increase internally. For this reason, despite an undeniable increase in

[157] Dong Guoqiang and Andrew G. Walder, "Nanjing's 'Second Cultural Revolution' of 1974," *The China Quarterly*, December 2012, 893–918, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741012001191; Elizabeth Economy, "30 Years After Tiananmen: Dissent Is Not Dead," *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 2 (April 2019): 57–63, https://doi-org.libproxy.nps.edu/10.1353/jod.2019.0024.

[158] Maryam Alemzadeh, "Iran Protests and Patterns of State Repression," *Iranian Studies* 56, no. 3 (2023): 557–61, https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2023.16; Wendy Pearlman, "Moral Identity and Protest Cascades in Syria," *British Journal of Political Science* 48, no. 4 (October 2018): 889–891, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123416000235.

[159] Victor Cha, "The End Is Near," in *The Impossible State: North Korea, Past and Future* (New York: Harper Collins, 2018), 445–452; Nehal El-Sherif, "Anti-Gaddafi Protests Continue in Libya Despite Violence," *McClatchy – Tribune Business News*, February 20, 2011, https://libproxy.nps.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.nps.edu/wire-feeds/roundup-anti-gaddafi-protests-continue-libya/docview/852869823/se-2.

information access and the benefits of the secondary economy, the total prevention of even minimal scattered protests in North Korea indicates the regime's vice grip on its society.

With these three factors in mind, the current overall assessment of Kim Jong-Un's regime is that it likely remains very strong. Defections remain historically low, prominent government officials appear loyal, and no mass movements have occurred in over a decade, despite dire conditions during the pandemic. The Fragile State Index, which ranks 179 countries worldwide based on measured state fragility, echoes this assessment and displays a clear trend of North Korea's state strength only growing stronger (even if it remains fragile compared to *other* countries' state structures by measures, like those of the Fragile State Index, that intend to capture the degree to which a state is thriving, not simply surviving.[160] This trend is particularly evident under Kim Jong-Un, as North Korea ranks as the 37th most fragile state, a clear *improvement* from its ranking as the 22nd most fragile state when he assumed power from Kim Jong-Il.[161] A variety of factors are accounted for in this ranking, most importantly for North Korea, a notable improvement in categories of Group Grievances, Economic Inequality, and Refugees and IDPs.[162] These three factors are interconnected in that the secondary economy has provided citizens the opportunity to function autonomously within the bounds of the oppressive system, whereas previously reliance on the state was larger. Additionally, increased information flow likely provides an outlet for individuals to break the monotony of North Korean life with some sort of relative normalcy. These factors are a reflection of Kim Jong-Un's ability to mitigate the potential fallout from increased information flow and the growth of the secondary economy, instead utilizing these destabilizing factors to reinforce his regime.

B. THE IMPACT OF INCREASED INFORMATION ACCESS

As laid out in Chapter Two, access to outside information and new forms of information technology is undoubtedly increasing. Like in most nations worldwide, though

160 Fragile States Index, "North Korea Country Dashboard" (Washington, D.C.: The Fund for Peace, 2023), https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/.

161 Fragile States Index, "North Korea Country Dashboard."

162 Fragile States Index, "Indicators" (Washington, D.C.: The Fund for Peace, 2023), https://fragilestatesindex.org/indicators/.

in a much more constrained form, this trend is expected to continue toward becoming a routine piece of daily life in North Korea. The Kim Jong-Un regime is more than likely aware of this trend, and aware of the unlikelihood of completely stopping it. Because of this, Kim has implemented myriad ways to counter the effects of outside information and access to information technology by using the platforms themselves as new forms of surveillance, while also relying upon tried-and-true "pre-technological" methods of repression, prosecution, and co-optation. For decades, experts, defectors, and NGOs have dedicated countless resources to infiltrating North Korea with outside information, but it appears today that the Kim regime has successfully neutralized this threat through the aforementioned counter-methods. That said, information access might ultimately prove to be a long-term method of slowly eroding the regime's control.

The gradual, tiered approach to introducing cell phones into North Korean society is a telling sign of the regime's broader intention of using information technology to its advantage under the false pretense of benevolence in form of technological advancement for its people. Most of the illicit information that North Koreans consume is on such sanctioned platforms as computers, cell phones, and TV sets. Because the very technology that enables greater information access also enables the regime to suppress political activity and to co-opt potential challengers, the regime almost doubly wins. Illicit information is consumed, making daily life in North Korea somewhat more bearable with new forms of entertainment, while the regime simultaneously almost totally eliminates the possibility of organizing mass political movements. Modern technology is simply a new and more all-encompassing form of social control, supplementing the classic *inminban* and other repressive methods.

Repression of its population is nothing new for the North Korean leadership. And, even as North Korea is internationally recognized for its severe hard repression tactics, including assassinations, it is also an expert in "soft repression," particularly with the growth of information technology. As noted above, the regime has gradually loosened its stance on accessibility to technological advancements such as the intranet and cell phones, but what Kim once viewed as a clear threat to his regime's power has evolved into a means of surveillance and control under the guise of liberalization. For decades, North Koreans

had been completely denied computer access.[163] Computer access simply provides another means of state repression – another method through which North Korea can use information technology innovation to crack down on its people and push state-sponsored propaganda.[164] As computer and cell phone usage has expanded in North Korea, so have surveillance devices in indigenously produced cell phones and tablets.[165] All legal cell phones and tablets in North Korea are produced and modified by the government to include surveillance applications and operating systems that are programmed to identify potential political opposition.[166] Increased access to computers thus allows North Korea the opportunity to further carry out soft repression of its people through censorship and surveillance, in order to identify potential threats such as the organization of anti-regime movements and possibly disloyal personnel.[167] All computers connected to the North Korean network automatically receive software intended to monitor, track, and prevent access to unauthorized files.[168] This includes encrypted files because the encryption software is also state created, making computer privacy an uphill battle.[169] Software also logs and watermarks all user data to create a paper trail, in order to prosecute those who access or distribute unauthorized files.[170] In sum, personal computers, tablets, or cell phones that connect to the North Korean network are infiltrated with this software designed to counter outside information, even including deleting files from SD cards inserted in the device.[171] All authorized files and websites usually contain some sort of propaganda that has become commonplace throughout the dynasty's history. This is further enabled by the government's *songbun* political class system to better target the threats that information

163 Gerschewski and Dukalskis, "How the Internet Can Reinforce Authoritarian Regimes," 16–17.

164 Gerschewski and Dukalskis, 16–17.

165 Silberstein, "How High-Tech Can Boost Regime Stability in North Korea."

166 Silberstein, 596–598.

167 Gerschewski and Dukalskis, "How the Internet Can Reinforce Authoritarian Regimes," 13–14.

168 Martyn Williams, "Digital Trenches: North Korea's Information Counter-Offensive" (Washington, D.C.: Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2019), 34, https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Williams_Digital_Trenches_Web_FINAL.pdf.

169 Williams, "Digital Trenches: North Korea's Information Counter-Offensive," 34.

170 Williams, 35–36.

171 Silberstein, "How High-Tech Can Boost Regime Stability in North Korea," 596.

technology presents. As cell phone usage and computer usage expand beyond the government's scope of monitoring capability, surveillance is focused on those lower in the *songbun* hierarchy – that is, those already identified as least loyal to the regime.[172] This allows the regime to narrow the breadth of its surveillance tactics on those considered most likely to use information technology inappropriately.

"Soft repression" can also be said to include ideological indoctrination that muffles the impact of outside information. The demand for constant adulation of the Kim family is already beaten into North Koreans through propaganda, monuments, state-sponsored media, banners, signs, and so on.[173] As cell phone usage and intranet usage grow, North Koreans' already extensive exposure to government-sponsored propaganda and ideology is expected only to grow with it.[174] This includes painting both South Korea and the West, namely the United States, as evil countries where North Koreans would be subject to harsh treatment, as a counter to the attractive images of those countries available in illicit media.[175] The Kim regime's ability to control the narrative regarding prospective life in or under a democratic South Korean government has contributed to a decrease in defectors, despite the increase in information flow.[176]

Co-optation is another critical aspect in ensuring cohesion amongst the government's elites and those closest to Kim Jong-Un.[177] This has been a staple during the Kim dynasty in preventing potential threats from within its inner circles. The growth of information technology might allow the North Korean regime to use rising youths' desire for education and advancement to its advantage. Kim recognizes the necessity and

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[172] Scott Thomas Bruce, "A Double-Edged Sword: Information Technology in North Korea," *East-West Center*, no. 105 (October 2012), https://libproxy.nps.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.nps.edu/scholarly-journals/double-edged-sword-information-technology-north/docview/1716947985/se-2.

[173] Yeo, *State, Society, and Markets in North Korea*, 2–4.

[174] Yeo, 4.

[175] Khang Vu, "The Implausibility of the 'Vietnam Model' for North Korea: The Security Factor," *The Diplomat*, November 28, 2020, https://thediplomat.com/2020/11/the-implausibility-of-the-vietnam-model-for-north-korea-the-security-factor/.

[176] King, "Number of North Korean Defectors Drops to Lowest Level in Two Decades."

[177] Gerschewski and Dukalskis, "How the Internet Can Reinforce Authoritarian Regimes," 15–16.

prospective profitability of information technology, so offering education in this field with follow-on employment not only benefits the regime but might also incentivize loyalty.[178] Though a program of this sorts would likely only reach a select group of individuals, it might further encourage influential, loyal elites to continue propping up the Kim regime.

If not, all three Kims, especially Kim Jong-Un, have ultimately proven unhesitant to purge elites that are perceived as disloyal. Using an otherwise scarce resource like information technology under the assumption of future party membership as a bargaining chip to essentially buy loyalty further entrenches the regime through loyal subordinates. In a broader context, more access to formerly rare commodities can act as a social pacifier for the Kim regime in that it limits grievances, leading to less discontent amongst the people at large.[179]

Despite its reduced control over domestic commerce and access to illicit information, North Korean leadership has maintained a stranglehold over its people in part through sheer force and brutality. Genuine belief in the regime has seemingly waned since Kim Il-Sung's death. North Koreans were so indoctrinated to the cause that Kim Il-Sung was a god-like being to many citizens. His leadership luckily coincided with fairly well-subsidized rations and an economy that outpaced South Korea's for roughly the first 20 years following the Korean War.[180] Had North Korea's economy tanked earlier, perhaps Kim Il-Sung's legacy would have been different, but the minimal qualms North Koreans seemed to have had during his era were quickly supplanted by real belief. Once Kim Il-Sung died, though, his successor Kim Jong-Il did not garner the same sort of buy-in, nor did he push the narrative as strongly.[181] Skepticism grew after the immortal Kim Il-Sung's death and the total collapse of the system he had built.[182] Though Kim Il-Sung also purged his opposition and dissenters,

[178] Gerschewski and Dukalskis, 15–16.

[179] Dukalskis, "North Korea's Shadow Economy: A Force for Authoritarian Resilience or Corrosion?," 490.

[180] Byung-Yeon Kim, "Performance of the North Korean System," in *Unveiling the North Korean Economy: Collapse and Transition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 79–81.

[181] Lawrence Kuznar, "The Language of Dynasty: Quantitative Discourse Analysis of Kim Il-Sung, Kim Jong-Il, and Kim Jong-Un, 1930–2020," *North Korean Review* 19, no. 1 (Spring 2023): 22–41.

[182] Demick, "The Good Die First," 133–148.

Kim Jong-Il relied upon this method of resolution due to waning belief and increasing access to knowledge about the outside world. In other words, Kim Jong-Il, and later Kim Jong-Un, traded the threat of brutality for genuine loyalty to the regime.

Another means of enforcement in North Korea is the gulags or re-education camps scattered sporadically throughout the country for those deemed a danger to the state. There are currently six different types of detention centers in North Korea, each with its own unique purpose and level of severity, with the *kwanliso*, or political labor camps, likely the harshest and most dreaded.[183] The exact number of prisoners in these political labor camps is unknown but estimates range between 80,000 and 200,000.[184] Abuse and torture are commonplace at these camps, as most prisoners arrive with life sentences attached. Even though illegal activity is largely overlooked in exchange for a bribe, almost all North Koreans are subject to imprisonment at any time.[185] In the other five prisons, types of sentences vary depending on the assessed threat to the regime, along with the person's social class that dates back generations to pre-Korean war.[186] With these threats constantly looming over the people's heads, subordination to the regime is nearly impeccable and amassing resistance nearly impossible.

The Kim regime's continued reliance on hard repression – sometimes combined with softer forms –not only stands to counter any anti-regime movement that external information might spur but also helps prevent such developments in the first place. The threat of being sent to prison camps, publicly executed, and meanwhile possibly surveilled by peers quash information growth's potential for destabilization.[187] The Kim dynasty has relied on a variety of tactics to maintain power – specifically, mental manipulation followed by physical

[183] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: North Korea" (Washington, D.C.: United States State Department, 2022), https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/north-korea/#:~:text=Prison%20conditions%20were%20harsh%20and,and%20camps%20for%20political%20prisoners.

[184] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor.

[185] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor.

[186] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor.

[187] Yeo, *State, Society, and Markets in North Korea*, 20–22.

force if necessary.[188] Essentially, this is soft repression followed by hard repression. North Korea will filter information accessible by the new information technology and push its own propaganda to further legitimize itself (soft repression). Those who play by the rules and accept information access for what it is in this oppressed state are rewarded with continued access and possibly expansion of accessibility in the future. Those who attempt to explore outside the bounds set by the authoritarian government suffer. As information technology continues to expand in North Korea, citizens' sheer numbers limit the government's ability to exert its power in response. However, the North Korean regime has shifted toward accepting this limited ability to surveil all users, punishing those who violate the rules harshly in order to deter others from following suit.[189]

C. THE IMPACT OF THE SECONDARY ECONOMY

As with the increase in information access, there are many variables to account for in terms of the secondary economy's impact on regime stability. Widespread reliance on the secondary economy has made this a major factor in regime stability, but analysts debate whether the secondary economy has strengthened or weakened the Kim regime. Three main factors to focus on when assessing its impact are the secondary economy's embeddedness in daily life today, the *donju's* economic role, and the regime's ability to crack down.

Once viewed as a possible economic reformist, Kim Jong-Un has proven himself to be just the opposite. His economic model reinforces the secondary economy, allowing it to remain operable and a significant piece of the North Korean system. The regime seems to allow this illicit market activity to continue for two main reasons: it benefits from the secondary economy both financially and socially. First, because it is such a large piece of the nation's gross domestic product, eliminating it now would be difficult. Removing a central piece of North Koreans' income and source of nourishment would almost certainly destabilize control over the population – not to mention reducing the rents skimmed off by

188 Nina Hachigian, "The Internet and Power in One-Party East Asian States," *The Washington Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 42–43.

189 Alexandre Mansourov, "North Korea on the Cusp of Digital Transformation," *Nautilus Institute*, October 20, 2011, https://www.nautilus.org/wp -content/uploads/2011/12/ DPRK_Digital_Transformation.pdf.

the regime. Second, while life in North Korea is certainly not ideal, and many North Koreans now have enough knowledge to compare their country to South Korea and China, the secondary market keeps them happy enough to remain satisfied with the status quo. Economic prosperity, though vastly underwhelming compared to South Korea, is now attainable, as are luxury goods like Chinese clothing, which were formally virtually unattainable. Without the secondary economy, the regime's stability would almost certainly face an increased threat.

This level of embeddedness does not come without its own underlying threats, though. The secondary economy presents destabilizing contradictions and challenges for North Korea's self-proclaimed socialist government. It has produced a more bottom-up, capitalist society because of the government's inability to provide properly for its citizens, both deteriorating the broader population's reliance on the regime for nourishment and creating an outlet for widespread cooperation amongst a historically disaggregated population.[190] The *songbun* system's original intent was to punish those considered disloyal to the regime by repressing access to key opportunities necessary for a relatively successful life. But citizens of lower social status disproportionately engage in the secondary economy (as these were the citizens disproportionately affected by PDS failure), and this has given "disloyal" citizens more power.[191] The capitalistic nature of the secondary market and high levels of corruption also have the potential to destabilize the socialist regime, because they undermine socialism's core values of equity and institutional control.[192]

The *donju* class poses another potential threat to the regime because of its growing wealth and control over some aspects of the secondary economy. As the Kim regime has allowed the secondary economy to flourish, a wealthy class has developed, in addition to an unprecedented capitalistic hierarchy within the populace. Though not officially sanctioned, the *donju* are often relied upon by the state for additional income and to finance development

[190] Alzo David-West, "North Korea and the Contradiction of Inversion: Dictatorship, Markets, Social Reform," *North Korean Review* 9, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 101–103, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43908909.

[191] David-West, "North Korea and the Contradiction of Inversion: Dictatorship, Markets, Social Reform," 100–101.

[192] Byung-Yeon Kim, "Regime Stability in North Korea," in *Unveiling the North Korean Economy: Collapse and Transition* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 179–180.

projects like apartment complexes and real estate renovations.[193] In exchange for authority to operate, the regime charges a premium or skims off the profits while often claiming credit for infrastructural development.[194] The *donju* class's wealth has grown significantly under Kim Jong-Un, with an estimated combined cash holding of $12 billion in 2018.[195] This level of wealth is significant in comparison to North Korea's overall gross domestic product, which could effectively delegate too much power to this new class of elites. The more the secondary market is reliant on the *donju* to facilitate employment and supply of goods, the more leverage this class owns, possessing the potential to directly influence the regime.

But precisely because the *donju* exert disproportionate power over the secondary economy, the regime has targeted this elite class with policies to regain control, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic began.[196] Kim Jong-Un has targeted the *donju* and private marketeers at large with crackdowns on foreign currency, increased taxation on consumer markets, and stricter business registration policies.[197] Additionally, the regime froze out civilian beneficiaries during the pandemic by conducting state-sponsored smuggling while cracking down on other cross-border smuggling that supplies the private markets and entrepreneurs.[198] This likely decimated financial gains for those who rely upon the secondary economy but benefited the regime itself both financially and in terms of control. Given their significant wealth, relative to the average North Korean, the *donju* are vulnerable to targeted state policies like increases in loyalty payments that the regime mandates in exchange for permission to operate. Given their wealth, the *donju* often deal in foreign currencies with no official banking system. Because of this, targeted crackdowns on foreign

193 Anna Fifield, "The Elites of Pyonghattan," in *The Great Successor* (PublicAffairs, 2019), 142–56.

194 Fifield, "The Elites of Pyonghattan."

195 Corrado, "Kim Jong-Un's Risky Economic Gambit."

196 Rengifo-Keller, "Food Insecurity in North Korea Is at Its Worst Since the 1990s Famine."

197 Benjamin Katzeff Silberstein, "The North Korean Economy: Growing Resource Scarcity May Accelerate State Control Over Markets," *38North*, February 11, 2020, sec. Economy, https://www.38north.org/2020/02/bkatzeffsilberstein021120/; Yeo, *State, Society, and Markets in North Korea*.

198 Sang Yong-Lee, "North Korea's Dramatically Increasing Trade Deficit With China: A Short-Term Trend or Longer-Term Strategy?," *38North*, July 20, 2022, https://www.38north.org/2022/07/north-koreas-dramatically-increasing-trade-deficit-with-china-a-short-term-trend-or-longer-term-strategy/.

currency exchange and loyalty payments can easily impact the entrepreneurs' pocketbooks when the regime feels threatened.[199]

As previously mentioned, in theory the *donju* operate independent of the state through privatization of their respective businesses. In reality, however, the newborn entrepreneurial class's operability is actually dependent on the state, which enables it to operate at the cost of bribes and kickbacks to the central government. The regime is likely aware of its inability to provide sufficient goods and services to its people, so it delegates that responsibility to the entrepreneurial class, while being compensated itself with kickbacks. In essence, this builds infrastructure like premium apartment complexes in Pyongyang, while also producing food and day-to-day products for sale on the secondary market with little cost to the central government. To the outsider, and, to an extent, the insider, Kim Jong-Un receives credit for North Korea's development and steady food supply as a result of the entrepreneur's projects.[200] At the same time, all of this activity remains illegal on paper and is enforceable as the regime sees fit.

Additionally, whatever leverage the *donju* class wields against the regime is likely neutralized by its own reliance on the structure in place for sustained success: it has learned how to operate under the status quo, which removes incentives to disrupt it, especially given the unpredictability of what might replace a deposed Kim regime. In other words, the *donju* class is incentivized to abandon grievances against the regime in exchange for the continued ability to operate.

North Korea's ability to enforce laws prohibiting secondary market activity on an ad hoc basis is one reason the secondary economy actually works in Kim's favor.[201] The population is aware that it is breaking the law when conducting this illicit activity, and the Kim regime has enabled a system of bribery which allows it to continue.[202] However, when the regime needs an excuse to prosecute an individual perceived as a threat to the regime, or

199 Corrado, "Kim Jong-Un's Risky Economic Gambit."

200 Fifield, "The Elites of Pyonghattan."

201 Dukalskis, "North Korea's Shadow Economy: A Force for Authoritarian Resilience or Corrosion?," 493–496.

202 Dukalskis, 498–499.

otherwise, it has the grounds to proceed: it can ignore its own complicity in corrupt practices and enforce the law. At the same time, since wide swaths of North Korean society take part in the secondary market, including public officials and law enforcement, that the public's interest in maintaining the status quo in terms of economic and consumer goods availability decreases the chances of unrest.[203] The logic of dependence that buys *donju* complicity operates more broadly as well.

Similarly, the fact that high-ranking officials in the Kim regime and regular law enforcement officers collude with the secondary economy leads the system to strengthen the Kim regime because of increased dependence. Because the secondary economy has enabled ordinary citizens to achieve an enhanced standard of living, this reduces economic dissatisfaction enough to prevent a total governmental collapse. For these reasons, the Kim regime and the secondary economy are mutually reliant on each other for sustainability. Kim similarly attributes the regime's ability to survive the prevalent secondary economy to its balancing the delicate equilibrium between the regime, government officials, and market participants. Kim Jong-Un maintains loyalty from his government officials by allowing them to take bribes to supplement their otherwise lackluster salaries, relative to their daily duties.[204] In turn, these bribe-taking officials enable a secondary economy to continue, which allows the Kim regime to maintain its closed-off economy because the population is thus able to evade threats of malnutrition and starvation.

At the same time, the regime seems able to survive interruptions to the private economy, though how long this could continue remains unknown. The moderately-long COVID-19 pandemic served as a litmus test to establish the bounds of enforcement. Trade with China, North Korea's top trading partner by a wide margin, was drastically reduced, most certainly affecting availability of goods on the markets. Still, no dissent was reported during this period, despite a food shortage reaching near-famine levels. Where Kim Jong-Un's regime excels is instilling unpredictability and fear into its government officials and

[203] Dukalskis, 489–490.

[204] Kim, "Regime Stability in North Korea," 180–181.

population, in order to avoid an uncontrollable level of corruption and general instability stemming from the secondary economy.[205]

D. CONCLUSION

External threats aside, information access and economic changes remain a conduit to destabilize the Kim regime internally due to their potential to increase grievances within North Korean society. With these factors in mind, the biggest hurdle in North Korea remains the inability to organize mass political movements, as evidenced by Kim Jong-Un's seemingly unchallenged decade in power. There is no denying that both access to information and the secondary economy are expanding and evolving, becoming more prevalent in daily life as time progresses. Despite this, no known uprisings have occurred in North Korea and the number of refugees from the North settling in South Korea has sharply declined since Kim Jong-Un assumed power in 2011.[206] Most obvious, though, is that Kim Jong-Un remains in power, which implies an ability to implement effective techniques to mitigate the threat of information growth and the secondary economy's destabilizing factors. It is also possible that the improvements in daily life that information and the secondary economy have offered has quelled internal motivation for mass uprisings against the regime. Challenging the regime directly is almost a guaranteed death sentence, and this, combined with the unknown of the alternative, appears to have made Kim's strength both domestically and internationally as strong as ever.

[205] Kim, 197–198.

[206] Byung-Yeon Kim, "Households: Surviving in Informal Markets," 94–96.

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