

## Special Research Paper



# Social Control in North Korea: Adjusting to a market economy and the digital age

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Collective action has not been undertaken by the citizens of North Korea, and a stable political system has been maintained there for about 70 years, since its founding in September 1948, because of its firm social control. North Korea sanctions private markets, even though the government exercises complete control over the socialist planned economy. These markets funnel information from overseas, and make it accessible to citizens. However, a stable social order continues to exist. Citizens still pledge absolute loyalty to the supreme leader. Their lives are strictly controlled and monitored by both the security police and the Workers Party of Korea.

The qualitative changes in the mechanisms of social control that may have been made in North Korea are clearly scrutinized. Changes such as the availability of information that can be observed in North Korean society are clearly scrutinized. I investigate the reasons that underlie political stability in North Korea. The evolution of qualitative changes in the mechanisms of social control employed by the country are examined by analyzing North

Korean society as a whole, on a macro level. Social control is scrutinized comprehensively by analyzing both “aspects that have changed qualitatively” and “aspects that have not changed qualitatively.” The actions of individuals fall outside the scope of this analysis.

Extant literature is restricted to the examination of the changing power relations between the security police and residents, as well as the relationship between the political strategies of the supreme leader and social control. Questions concerning “qualitative changes in social control,” with respect to the expansion of the market economy and informatization, have not been adequately studied.

I attempt to explain why collective action by citizens has not occurred. I focus on an area that has escaped scholars’ attention: “qualitative changes in the mechanisms of social control.”

The changes triggered by the society-wide turmoil that followed the suspension of rationing forced North Korea to modify the ways in which it controlled society. As markets expanded, despite the government’s tight grip on the planned economy, there was an inflow of outside information that came along with the commercial goods. There was also an inflow of the type of technology that could be used to disseminate information, such as mobile phones with overseas calling capability and computer-related equipment, such as USB devices. Moreover, the introduction of a mobile phone service for domestic calls in 2008 propelled the spread of information across North Korea.

I surmise that these developments created a new information landscape that compelled the national government to take action and change the ways in which it maintained social control.

I set out to identify the “causal mechanism,” including the political, economic, and social factors, underlying the manifestation of qualitative changes in social control in North Korea.

I consider the reasons behind the absence of collective action.

My research indicates that the introduction of domestic mobile phones and the inflow of computer hardware, such as USB devices resulted in changing the way of social control in North Korea.

In light of the digitization of North Korea, I examined the types of changes the government was motivated to make.

I examine the “qualitative changes in social control” that occurred to adapt

to the changes in the social environment. It is argued that the absence of collective action in North Korea cannot be explained, or fully understood, without first examining the changes in the mechanisms of social control.

In order to comprehensively analyze changes in the mechanisms of social control, this research divides social control in North Korea into three time periods.

The three periods are a) *social control under the information embargo*, b) *social control during the time of social adjustment*, and c) *social control in the digital age*.

The changes in the mechanisms of social control are analyzed by identifying the ways in which they were brought about by political and social changes, as well as the introduction of technology, during the three aforementioned periods.

It is postulated here that the mechanisms of social control that were employed during *the information embargo* were prototypical forms of social control in North Korea. However, there were changes *during the time of social adjustment*, and more changes during *the digital age*.

I have analyzed the mechanisms of *social control employed during the information embargo*. These prototypical forms were created during the Kim Il-sung era. I also have examined the mechanisms of *social control employed during the time of social adjustment*. This is done by exploring the gradual digitization of North Korea during the time when the country had a dual economy—the period between the country's shift from an emerging

market economy to the current planned economy—triggered in part by the suspension of rationing. According to the analysis, although Kim Jong-il sought to change the mechanisms used to control society, he ultimately failed and resorted to violence.

I consider *social control in the digital age* and the social control methods Kim Jong-un has been employing in response to the digital age, where informatization is on the increase due to the use of mobile phones, the full-scale rollout of the intranet, as well as the Internet, and the widespread use of computer technology.

It is not possible to adequately explain why collective action has not manifested itself in North Korea without first analyzing the qualitative

changes in the mechanisms of social control.

The establishment of a robust leadership system was the result of social control because, after winning a power struggle, Kim Il-sung established the Juche idea under the Monolithic Ideological System, and subsequently managed to make citizens absolutely loyal to him. The analysis here demonstrates that social control was established through a) ideological control and b) physical control.

Ideological control was accomplished by creating the notion that the supreme leader takes precedence over everything, including family bonds and the pursuit of individual interests. It institutionalized the relationship between Kim Il-sung and the people by defining it as relationship between his love and the people's allegiance. Further analysis shows that ideological control was realized by connecting three systems of thought—the Monolithic Ideological System, the Juche idea, and the theory of the Socio-Political Organism—and demanding that people remain loyal to the supreme leader and devote their lives to the revolution.

Physical control was exercised simultaneously and included the introduction of rationing, the Party's complete control over a person's job, denying residents the right to freedom of movement, and obliging people to belong to a "unit" in an organization.

Residents were required to participate in political events, information was cut off, and individuals, who were merely members of their respective units, were only expected to remain loyal and offer their services to the supreme leader.

North Korea managed to swiftly create its prototypical social control mechanisms, which were based on absolute loyalty to Kim Il-sung. A few factors contributed to this outcome. Kim Il-sung deified himself and succeeded in restricting people's actions. By linking Marxism–Leninism to the reality of North Korea, and blending it with Korea's Confucius culture, Kim managed to implant a uniquely North Korean ideology into people at an early stage. This was reinforced by strict ideological education that began early in childhood.

Kim Jong-il's attempt to adjust the mechanisms of social control, in response to the expansion of the markets when the planned economy was still firmly protected, did not lead to a shift away from the existing forms of social control to the new forms. This resulted in imperfect social control.

The suspension of rationing caused the residents' loyalty toward the Party and the government to wane, and the time of social turmoil pushed residents to pick up capitalist values. Thus began the pursuit of "individual interests." Furthermore, the inflow of information from abroad injected "comparative concepts" into people. With respect to ideological control, in his attempt to redirect the loyalty toward Kim Il-sung to himself, Kim Jong-il introduced the "Military-First Policy."

He enforced a form of ideological control based on the militarization of all citizens in order to bolster his legitimacy. On the other hand, during this period, the country was hit hard by an economic crisis triggered by food shortages in 1994, and the government tried to alleviate people's discontent by relaxing "restrictions on movement" so that people could procure food on their own.

In addition, Kim Jong-il implemented reforms based on "utilitarianism" to restore the economy, and he decided to allow the use of mobile phones for domestic calls in 2008.

However, mobile phones hindered the government's ability to control the spread of information, and that became a progressively serious challenge. Kim Jong-il tried to address this problem by exercising physical control. Wiretapping was used, for example, and mobile phone calls were censored. Violent measures were even undertaken. For example, people were punished for being exposed to information from overseas. My analysis indicates that the effectiveness of such efforts was limited.

The relationship between the development of information technology and the changes in the mechanisms of social control.

The analysis addresses an important gap in the literature. The author conceptualizes this period as *social control in the digital age*, which is characterized by the application of information technology as a means of social control. With respect to ideological control, Kim Jong-un employed the term "Kim Il-sung-Kim Jong-ilism" and esteemed the "Ten Principles for the Establishment of a Monolithic Ideological System" to help maintain an ideology that required people to remain absolutely loyal to the Kims.

As for physical control, after deeming undesirable all outside information that would compromise people's loyalty to Kim Jong-un and instill them with non-Socialist ideas, he promoted the development of information technology that could be used to control society by cutting off

people's access to outside information.

He advanced the domestic production of smartphones and computer equipment that could be used in North Korea, but that could not be used to access information outside the country. Since around 2013, North Korea has been developing a system called the "Electronic Signature System" that can completely prevent the installation and modification of any content that the government does not want people to see. North Korea has also developed technology that can track those who attempt to browse or consume content banned by the government.

Moreover, by coercing people to use domestically-produced products, the government prevents citizens from obtaining information that the government does not want them to obtain.

The entire information technology industry is under the strict and sole control of the government.

By using information technology as a mechanism of social control, the North Korean government has managed to maintain control over society.

We find that there is a "causal mechanism" that comprises political, economic, and social factors and the changes in technology that impacted social control in each period. Included in such factors are power struggles, the suspension of rationing, the expansion of the market in the planned economy, the inflow of outside information, information technology policy, and innovations in information technology.

North Korea has, through trial and error, developed new forms of social control by adjusting to the transitions between eras. In other words, the stability of the political system presently enjoyed by the North Korean government could not have been maintained if the country had not changed its mechanisms of social control in response to political, economic, and social changes, as well as changes in people's access to information. That is, my research argues that, without obtaining an understanding of the "qualitative changes in social control," the reasons for the absence of collective action in North Korea cannot be explained.

Researchers who have conducted previous studies on North Korea have not examined the way in which Kim Jong-un has used technology as a mechanism of social control.

This "blind spot" in North Korean studies warrants additional investigation. If North Korea is to follow the path toward reform and open-

up the country, North Korea is likely to emulate the Chinese model of social control, which includes government control over information systems, and is similar to the one North Korea has constructed.