

## **Reading and Response #3**

### **Total control in North Korea – McBirney (2016)**

Picture this: a society where the government is in charge of designing everyone's clothes. Sound a little crazy? Not to the government of North Korea, which has its own Apparel Research Center and Clothing Industry Department. These government agencies design most of the clothing North Koreans wear, and they are just one example of how the North Korean government works tirelessly to control every aspect of its citizens' lives.

#### **A STRUCTURE OF CONTROL**

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or North Korea, has a highly centralized, totalitarian form of government. The U.S. government classifies North Korea as a communist state, meaning one dominant political party controls the government and the economy and claims to be moving towards a more equal society. In this case, that one party is the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), and it controls every branch of the government and all "elections."

Leaders of North Korea all come from the Kim family. The current leader is Kim Jong-Un, who not only heads the WPK, but also chairs the National Defense Commission and commands the Korean People's Army. The Kim family is wildly popular among North Koreans — every citizen wears a lapel pin bearing a portrait of Kim Il-sung, the first leader from the Kim dynasty.

North Korea also has a legislative body, the Supreme People's Assembly, with almost 700 representatives elected by the people. Because the representatives are always pre-selected by the WPK and always run unopposed, the Party controls almost every law that is passed; most researchers agree that the Assembly has no real political power of its own.

#### **THE NEED FOR UNITY**

Like all political parties, the WPK has a very distinct ideology that controls all of its actions. They operate under the ideas of Juche, which strongly emphasize political, economic, and military independence from other nations. This is accomplished through social and political unity. Kim Jong-il, the second leader of the Kim dynasty, wrote, "The leader, the Party, and the masses form a body in which they share their destiny. Their firm unity based on ideology, will, morality, and obligation is a guarantee for the invincibility of the cause of socialism. We must rally all people around the Party and the leader more firmly, thus incessantly consolidating the might of the single-hearted unity." Unity and reverence for authority are two of the strongest guiding principles for the WPK's actions.

#### **GOVERNMENT AND DAILY LIFE**

Because of its desire for ideological unity among all citizens, the North Korean government has an iron grip over the daily lives of its citizens. From dawn to dusk, and from birth to death, the Korean people structure their lives around loyalty to their nation and to the Kims.

It all begins in kindergarten. North Korea provides 11 years of free public education for all children, but the public schools are quite different from those here in the U.S. One North Korean refugee explains: “You learn maths, science, biography, music, art and more but the most important subject is the life story of the Kim family.” Students memorize speeches by the Kims, repeat short mantras about the Kims and “the motherland,” and sing songs about their Great Leader.

Kim Jong-il spoke on the importance of a strong socialist education: “Only by strengthening political and ideological education can we bring up the children and young people to be communist, revolutionary workers who possess the revolutionary world outlook and distinguished personality.”

The reach of the WPK extends even into private homes. Morning newspapers include editorials supporting the Party’s ideology. In the 1990s, the government ordered that every house buy a framed copy of a poem about Kim Il-sung, and everyone had to memorize it.

One of the most important ways the WPK exerts its influence over people’s lives and thoughts is through art. The Kim family recognizes the power of art over hearts and minds, and they want to make sure all the art in North Korea represents communist ideals. One official said in 1986, “[Art and literature] must serve the Party as its powerful ideological weapon.... Writers and artists must, above all else, create many more works of revolutionary art and literature which deal in depth with the greatness of the respected leader... [and] describe the greatness of the party.” North Korea is so cut off from the rest of the world that its citizens accept this type of propaganda as truth — they have nothing that says otherwise.

## **TERRIFYING CONSEQUENCES**

Those who choose not to follow the prescribed North Korean lifestyle face grave consequences if they are caught. The WPK controls all law enforcement agencies and judicial systems. The police can monitor all digital communications, including phone calls and text messages, and a complex surveillance network lets them know the whereabouts of any citizen at any time. What are they watching for? They want to make sure no one is doing anything that might jeopardize the unity of the country.

The courts prosecute not only criminals, but also political deviants, often without a fair trial. Punishments can include stretches in slave labor camps, torture, or public executions. The United Nations has accused North Korea of crimes against humanity for its severe oppression and punishments, but the WPK government denies these accusations.

## **ECONOMIC HARDSHIP**

On top of living under heavy political oppression, North Koreans also face dismal economic conditions. As a communist nation, the government owns most industries and means of production,<sup>13</sup> and in order to maintain economic independence, it does not trade with other countries. Inefficiencies in government industries and a series of famines have made the

