

North Korea

A black chapter

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As the sun rises over the world's most totalitarian and isolated state, intelligence officers begin the deliveries of *Bulletin No 1*. This top-secret document, a compendium of the most important local and international events of the day, would probably be called a newspaper anywhere else. But, true to the outdated teachings of Stalin, the hermit regime of North Korea continues to believe that as information is power, control of information equals total political control. Thus, the real news of the nation and the world is restricted to a limited number of top political leaders—all members of the Politburo and some members of the Central Committee. At the other end of the scale the masses are treated to total ignorance, the few drips of information coming their way through the formidable propaganda machine.

So few people even have access to the approved Communist Party newspapers that selected articles are read aloud and broadcast by a series of loud speakers. Foreign information is so highly suspect, that those tiny number of North Koreans who are permitted to venture outside their impoverished borders are subject to rigorous searches, with intelligence officers instructed to confiscate even old newspaper wrappings from neighbouring China. The penalty for North Koreans caught listening to hostile foreign propaganda such as the BBC World Service is several years of slavery in a labour camp for the entire family. In the past few years, North Korea's crippling economic crisis and famine has meant a great reduction in the volume of propaganda material disseminated locally and overseas, a welcome relief for the postmen of Nepal who used to go on strike over the tons of books sent by friendly North Korea to their fellow

Communists in the Himalayas. But, poverty has nothing to relieve the people of North Korea of the burden of the state's message: for all the people of North Korea know Dear Comrade Kim Jong Il just might be demonstrating North Korea's fame all over an unknown world, which lies outside their hermetically sealed nation.

Juche *democracy*

North Korea, which is officially named the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, bases its political system on the 'guiding idea of *Juche*'. In theory, *Juche* means 'self-reliance'. In practice, it means the total monopoly on power of the ruling Communist Party (the Korea Workers' Party), and the Party's total control over every aspect of life including the maintenance of the nation's isolation from the rest of the world. The mass media plays a crucial role in a system in which the Communist leaders deem themselves the ultimate authority in deciding what the masses are both allowed to know and to think. The mass media, according to the North Korean constitution, 'should serve the aims of strengthening the dictatorship of the proletariat, bolstering the political unity and ideological conformity of the people and rallying them solidly behind the Party and the Great Leader in the cause of revolution' (1975, Article 53, Chapter 4). As the late Great Leader Kim Il Sung observed 'Printed materials are the most important means of linking the Party and the masses—a powerful weapon for organizing the working masses in the crucial tasks of political, economic and cultural construction the Party has proposed'.

Obviously, there is no form of democracy or freedom of the press in North Korea. The leadership, having watched the collapse of the Soviet Union and many of the Communist regimes in former Soviet satellite states, is well aware of the media's potential to hasten the fall of totalitarian regimes. Thus, North Korean leaders attach such enormous importance to the 'guidance' of the media that they directly supervise the production of the daily newspapers. The official book, *The Great Teacher of Journalists*, explains that

The Great Leader, the Dear Comrade Kim Jong Il is always among journalists and teaches them (about) every detailed problem arising in their activities, and kindly leads them to write and compile excellent

articles that arouse the sentiment of the masses in keeping with the Party's intentions. He also brings up journalists to be the Party's reliable writers under his wings and takes meticulous care of every facet of their life and activity... The love and generosity he confers upon the journalists is indeed boundless (first published in Pyongyang in 1983).

Most North Korean citizens have no concept of a mass media free of government control. In the five years I worked as a correspondent of Polish Press Agency in North Korea, I was frequently asked—even by high ranking officials—who gave me my instructions on what I should write. When I answered, 'No one gives me instructions, I am free to write whatever I consider correct, I was met with disbelief and suspicion 'No guidance at all? Impossible!' At least I was, personally, able to understand their suspicions because my journalistic career had begun in Poland under Communist rule, when the press was still subject to strict controls.

A Stalinist model

To understand the role of the media in North Korea it is useful to examine the model of information control devised by Stalin, and copied in some form by most, if not all, of the former Soviet Union's satellite states. The system is based on a concept of two circles of information flow—the inner (internal) and the outer (external) circles. Within the inner circle, information is provided solely to the ruling élite—the party, government and army leaders. This task belongs to the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), which is a government press agency equal to the Ministry of Information and subordinated directly to the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the Party Central Committee. Every day KCNA publishes a series of 'special bulletins'.

Bulletin No. 1 is distributed every morning among a limited number of top leaders. This strictly top-secret bulletin updates its readers on most important events in the country and the world. News is gathered by a network of local and foreign correspondents of KCNA as well as from foreign press agencies, collected by KCNA at their headquarters in Pyongyang. The bulletin includes also translations of every possible wire or press report published abroad about North Korea. Another strictly top secret bulletin provides information on developments in South Korea

gathered by the KCNA who monitor the South Korean media. Less detailed bulletins are distributed among lower ranking officials, while local party cadres receive a bulletin with only selected international news, abridged translations of articles concerning North Korea and brief updates on South Korea. There are also special version of bulletins for the army, the police, worker's unions and other institutions in which news is selectively highlighted or deleted. The bulletins serve not only as a source of reliable information to party cadres but access to them is one of society's most important indicators of a citizen's position within the political élite. Ironically, the KCNA bulletins are not usually censored. Thus, information is genuinely equated with power.

Newspapers, TV and radio form an outer circle of information. Among newspapers published in North Korea, the major national daily is *Rodong Sinmun*, the organ of the Korea Workers' Party. The *Minju Choson*, the organ of the North Korea government, as well as some other organs of the army, workers and youth unions or professional associations are also circulated nationally. There are also several local newspapers, including the *Pyongyang Daily*, the *Hamnam Daily* and the *Pyongnam Daily*. North Koreans have access to two national TV channels and handful of local TV stations in the bigger cities such like Pyongyang and Kaesong. Radio is much the same, with Korean Central Radio and Radio Pyongyang broadcasts covering the whole country, while provinces, cities and counties also have their own local radio programs. They are all owned by the State and are directly subordinate to central or local propaganda departments of the party.

The outer circle serves as a channel of propaganda and agitation for party policies. Whatever national or international news it provides is simply reprinted from KCNA wire services for the outer circle. Some local news is gathered independently, but editorials are provided directly by the propaganda department of the Central of local party committees. National newspapers are not sold on the streets; they are distributed to subscribers only, according to their political or professional affiliations. So, members of the party are allowed to subscribe to *Rodong Sinmun*, administrative staff receives *Minju Choson*, officers of the armed forces read the army newspaper, teachers read *Teachers News* and the railway management reads *Railway News*. Local newspapers are sold in news-

Losing control

stands in big cities. But, the majority of North Koreans—the working class masses—do not have any access to newspapers. Excerpts from newspapers are read to them through loudspeakers in factories and villages or written out on blackboards. TV and radio broadcasts, due to the very limited number of receivers, cover only a small portion of the North Korean population. Due to the acute shortage of electricity of the past few years, the electronic media's reach has virtually collapsed.

Between the inner and the outer circles of information stands censorship. KCNA obviously produces different wire services for the inner and outer circles. Outer circle information is prepared in line with strict instructions from the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the Central Committee. But even then, the KCNA outer circle service is scrutinised again by censors before it reaches its subscribers' offices. News prepared locally is also subject to censorship, with the convenience of the 'special censorship cell' in every editorial office. 'The less the masses know the better'—this golden rule of the North Korean regime is confirmed by the way in which outer circle information is selected. Only national newspapers distributed among approved subscribers in Pyongyang and the few other bigger cities contain a column with international news. The same newspapers that go into the provinces have already been stripped of this column. And it is not difficult to guess that local newspapers carry no news from abroad except about North Korea's glorious diplomatic triumphs.

No foreign contagion

The regime takes no risks when it comes to broadcasting, despite the pitiful state of the television industry. On the one hand, foreign broadcasts are jammed, and on the other, those who own TV and radio sets must have them adjusted so they can receive only domestic broadcasts. Even foreigners coming into North Korea, must hand over their TVs or radios for the authorities 'to fix'. Car radios are especially suspect as foreigners' cars are regarded as one of the most dangerous locations for potential, unsupervised meetings between foreigners and North Koreans. North Korean drivers of foreign diplomats or businessmen are considered at risk of being exposed to the danger of listening to foreign hostile propaganda.

There are, of course, no foreign newspapers or TV and radio programs legally available to ordinary North Koreans. Law strictly prohibits reading such newspapers or watching or listening to foreign stations. Access is limited to the ruling élite only. Still, some North Koreans try to listen in secret to South Korean, Chinese, Japanese, Russian or US radio stations. But, the number of listeners is tiny because of the risk of being denounced by neighbours, and the harsh punishments meted out to those caught.

North Koreans are not allowed to lock their doors at night so security agents may check their activities at any time. Routine punishment in cases of 'illegally listening to hostile foreign propaganda' is several years of slavery in a labour camp for the whole family. Those North Koreans who travel abroad are subject to thorough searches on their return. Border guards or Customs officials confiscate any foreign-printed material as well as any tapes or photos. I remember during one of my train trips from China to Pyongyang, I was sitting in a compartment with a representative of a North Korean foreign trade company. He was returning from China where he was inquiring about models of Chinese tractors his company was intending to import. At the North Korean border station of Sinuiju, Customs officers very carefully combed through his luggage. They confiscated all Chinese newspapers in which he had wrapped boxes of cigarettes and bottles of vodka. Then, they confiscated all the documentation about the Chinese tractors, claiming the authorities concerned must examine them first.

The information barrier is just as hermetically sealed in the reverse direction. North Korea borders are closed to foreigners, except for a tiny number of escorted tourists. The regime is particularly wary of foreign journalists. Of those western journalists who have managed to get into North Korea, many have posed as tourists. Only a tiny group of foreign correspondents is accredited in Pyongyang—journalists representing the Xinhua news agency and the Renmin Ribao daily from 'friendly' China plus Russian journalists representing ITAR-TASS agency. They base their reports on news gathered from the outer KCNA service, whispers from within the diplomatic community and from observing life on the streets.

Because everything in North Korea is a secret, including statistics and phone numbers, there is not much news to gather from North Korean officials. It is possible to wait weeks, even months, for interviews with officials, only to hear them parroting the official line. Foreign

correspondents' contacts with the regime are even more limited than those of diplomats and foreign businessmen residing in Pyongyang, because North Korea considers every foreign journalist a spy. The logic behind this assumption is a simple extension of the fact that every North Korean correspondent abroad is closely cooperating with the intelligence service. As in Stalinist Soviet Union or Maoist China, North Koreans are not allowed to talk with foreigners without authorisation. Interaction between foreigners and ordinary citizens is virtually non-existent.

Before the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989, there was a larger foreign correspondents community in Pyongyang, with journalists from the then 'friendly' countries such as Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria or Cuba. After 1989 only the Polish correspondent to North Korea was allowed to stay thanks to the agreement on the exchange of correspondents signed between KCNA and Polish Press Agency. I happened to be that correspondent and managed to report from North Korea for almost five years. I tried to portray the terrifying reality of poverty and totalitarianism and, finally, was expelled for this. The official pretext was an article I had published in *Far Eastern Economic Review*, warning of deteriorating North Korean–Chinese relations following the death of the Great Leader Kim Il Sung. Later, I was told by a reliable North Korean source that the article reached the son of Kim Il Sung, then the Dear Leader Kim Jong Il, who personally ordered my expulsion in 1995. I was arrested at the Pyongyang airport, proclaimed *persona non grata* and expelled back to China. In the official statement sent to the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the North Korean government accused me of 'insulting the DPRK leaders and whole nation' as well as 'spying'. By the mid 1990s, the North Korean authorities had expelled all correspondents of Russian newspapers but one on similar accusations—ITAR-TASS was allowed to maintain its office in Pyongyang.

The workers' paradise

The North Korean regime goes to a great deal of, largely wasted, effort to propagate the image of a 'workers' paradise', and promote its leaders abroad. An English-language weekly *Pyongyang Times* and some monthly pictorial magazines in English, Russian, French, German, Spanish, Arabic,

Korean, Japanese, Chinese and Esperanto are distributed abroad by North Korean diplomatic missions or sent to readers directly from Pyongyang. Radio Pyongyang also has broadcasts in these languages. The KCNA has wire news services in English, Chinese, Japanese, Russian, French and Spanish. Most recently, KCNA opened its website on the Internet in English, Japanese and Korean (www.kcna.co.jp). It is operated in cooperation with the Korea News Service, run by North Korean residents in Tokyo. The following is a typical example of 'news' from KCNA to foreign readers.

Pyongyang, September 13 (KCNA)—A delegation of the Khmer Democratic Party paid a congratulatory visit to the DPRK embassy in Cambodia on September 7 on the occasion of the 51st anniversary of the founding of the DPRK. The delegation laid a floral basket in the name of the party before the portraits of the President Kim Il Sung and General Secretary Kim Jong Il and paid respects to them. The head of the delegation said that the DPRK, founded by the great Kim Il Sung and led by the respected Kim Jong Il, is now demonstrating its fame all over the world, decisively smashing the isolation and suffocating moves of the international reactionaries. He said: 'We sincerely hope that the Korean people will achieve brilliant success in the struggle for building a powerful nation under the wise leadership of Marshal Kim Jong Il, true to the behest of Generalissimo Kim Il Sung' (1999).

After the war in the Persian Gulf, North Korean leaders realised that CNN, which promotes itself as 'apolitical' and enabled the Iraqi regime to present its position to the world, may also be of use for their propaganda purposes. They have invited CNN crews to Pyongyang, from time to time, for coverage of special events. However, CNN's hopes for establishing a permanent bureau in Pyongyang have not been realised. The crisis has also caused a major reduction in volume of propaganda magazines and books printed in Pyongyang in foreign languages for dissemination abroad, praising Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il's brilliant achievements. But, the message remains the same.

The conclusion cannot be optimistic. Hopes for change following the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, market economic reforms and the opening up of China and Vietnam have not materialised. The death of

Losing control

Kim Il Sung may have further sapped the regime's confidence. The besieged regime of Kim Jong Il seems to be clinging on ever more tightly to totalitarianism and isolation, its ideology almost comical in the late 1990s were it not for the consequent suffering of the people. The North Korean media plays only a minor role in providing information to its society, and remains a blind tool of propaganda and manipulation in the hands of the regime. With this reality, the paragraph of North Korean constitution guaranteeing freedom of speech, press, association and political activities is as meaningless as the 'news' North Korea produces.