

2 Years Into Kim Jong Un's Reign, Deeper Darkness Settles Over North Korea

It began with a media frenzy. Six months into Kim Jong Un's new reign over North Korea, the Internet was filled with images and video of the smiling new leader waving to his beloved people.

ABC news reported the "youthful supreme leader" was "attempting to forge a new image for himself and his country" by allowing women to wear pants and endorsing banned foods like French fries and pizza. A few months before, on Jan. 1, 2012, the newly minted leader of the world's most militant regime had publicly called for an end to the almost-50-year-old confrontation between the two Koreas.

The facade was not to last. Even as International Christian Concern (ICC) pointed out, the lack of any significant reforms to the regime's despotic policy toward religious minorities, the Kim Jong Un government was pumping more resources into expanding its horrific system of political prison camps, known as "Kwan-li-so."

On Dec. 4, Amnesty International released new satellite images of the camps where generations of families, many of them Christian, are sent to starve or work themselves to death. The images revealed that rather than close or curtail the growth of the nightmare camps, Kim Jong Un was working on their expansion.

All of this news, though, paled in comparison with the sheer brutality of the report ICC received last month on Nov. 11. According to a South Korean news source, at least 80 people were publicly executed in seven cities across North Korea on the same day. Their so-called "crimes" included watching South

Korean movies, distributing pornography and the “possession of Bibles.” At least one of those Bible owners was tied to a post in the center of a sports stadium, a bag placed over their head, as they were torn apart by machine gun fire until their body was “hard to identify afterwards.” Families of the “criminals” were reportedly sent to the Kwan-li-so.

The executions were widely viewed as a move by the only 30-year-old leader to consolidate his grip on the populace.

One source intimately familiar with the reclusive nation told ICC, “It just shows that Kim Jong Un is still trying to consolidate power, and I think this is an indication of his failure to do so.”

As to why Christians were among those executed, the source said, “I am sure all those executed knew information from the outside and [among them] were certainly Christians. The DPRK [Democratic People’s Republic of North Korea] has always considered Christians their greatest threat.”

Any doubts remaining that Kim Jong Un was determined to secure his position at all costs died last week when the state-controlled media announced that Kim’s uncle, Jang Song Thaek, had been publicly removed from his position of authority and executed only days later.

Jang was widely believed to be untouchable as the second most powerful figure in the country. Within a week of his execution, massive purges were erasing all references to Jang Song Thaek from North Korea’s history books.

What all of this repression means for Kenneth Bae, a U.S. missionary who recently became the longest-serving American prisoner in North Korea since the end of the Korean War, is anyone’s guess.

Bae is serving out a 15-year sentence of hard labor after being arrested in late 2012 for allegedly trying to overthrow

the hyper-paranoid state. Bae, who has been described as a “devout Christian,” was providing legal tours into North Korea while conducting quiet humanitarian work. Of course, in a nation where as many as 70,000 Christians are interned in the modern-day equivalent of concentration camps for simply being Christians, Bae’s sentence is tragically unsurprising.

Yet even as a deeper darkness appears to be settling over North Korea, there is some cause for hope. For the first time ever, and thanks in part to Christian advocates, the United Nations has a “Commission of Inquiry” into the atrocities being committed in the country. Its ultimate goal: to conclude if North Korea has committed “crimes against humanity” (a foregone conclusion for many).

Testimony given to the commission this year by defectors and survivors of the Kwan-li-so has already raised the profile of North Korean crimes substantially, giving hope that significant international pressure on the regime will soon be brought to bear.

Most notable, and perhaps even more significant in this author’s opinion, is that after 65 years of total war directed at Christianity, an unbelievably determined remnant of believers still free inside the country continues to hold fast to their faith.

In late October, new and exceedingly rare footage of underground believers quietly praying and singing in their homes was released by a Christian nongovernmental organization. The footage, which may have cost some believers the ultimate price to obtain, is emphatic proof that no amount of totalitarianism has been able to completely extinguish the fire that faith ignites.

If China’s current unprecedented revival is any indication, the final death knell of the modern world’s most evil regime (whenever it comes) may herald in an era of spiritual renewal

led by a core of Christian leaders whose faith survived insurmountable odds. One day, Pyongyang may even earn again its old title, "Jerusalem of the East."

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