

***POLITICAL CLASSIFICATION AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE  
IN NORTH KOREA***

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Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, colleagues, and guests. I am pleased to appear before you to discuss North Korea's social structure. I have been asked to say a few words specifically about the North Korean regime's political classification system.

My brief presentation is in two parts: First, on North Korea's social structure in theory, and second, on social structure in reality.

No dictatorship can afford to grant its people social and political equality, but the North Korean regime has constructed a more elaborate model of political stratification, discrimination, and persecution than most dictatorships, thanks in part to the fact that the current ruler, Kim Jong-il, and his late father, Kim Il-sung, have had over 50 years to perfect their political system.

It is not uncommon to distinguish between those who (we believe) are with us and those who are against us. This is the basis of the political classification system in North Korea. In this case, "with us" is supposed to mean "with the North Korean people in their struggle to achieve socialism." However, as the political classification system is used by the authorities, "with us" instead means "personally loyal to the Kim Jong-il and his regime."

The following brief description of the Kim regime's three-part political classification system is condensed from a description in the book *North Korea through the Looking Glass* that I co-authored with Ralph C. Hassig. A similar description may be found in the annual white papers on

human rights published by the Korea Institute for National Unification in Seoul.

Since the 1950s, the Kim regime has subjected its people to a series of political examinations in order to sort out those who are presumed to be loyal or disloyal to the regime. After a three-year period of examination that began in 1967, then-president Kim Il-sung reported to the Fifth Korean Workers' Party Congress in 1970 that the people could be classified into three political groups: a loyal "core class," a suspect "wavering class," and a politically unreliable "hostile class."

Individuals are further classified into 51 subcategories, such as those in the wavering class who had been landowners before the communists came to power, or those who had resided in the southern half of Korea before 1945. The political history of one's parents, grandparents, and relatives as distant as second cousins is also a determining factor in the classification process. As of the most recent Party Congress, which was held in 1980, approximately 25 per cent of the population fell into the core class, 50 percent fell into the wavering class, and the remaining unfortunate 25 per cent were relegated to the hostile class.

An individual's political loyalty is likely to be re-examined anytime he or she comes to the attention of the authorities, for example when being considered for a job, housing, or travel permit. One's political classification is not a matter of public knowledge, nor is it known to the individual, but it is recorded in the personal record that follows every North Korean throughout life, and of course becomes part of the record of that person's children and relatives as well.

Only people classified as politically loyal can hope to obtain responsible positions in North Korean society. People classified as members of the wavering class are unlikely to be considered for membership in the Korean Workers Party. People who fall into the hostile class are discriminated against in terms of employment, food, housing, medical care, and place of residence.

This classification system is obviously an inefficient means of determining how committed a person is to socialism, or how loyal to the Kim regime. Many people with drive and talent, who in fact are patriotic North Koreans, are prevented from participating fully in North Korean life

because their official record has been tainted by the historical political affiliations of ancestors or relatives. But for the Kim regime, people are largely expendable, and it appears to be the viewpoint of the regime that it is better to be safe than sorry when it comes to ensuring regime security.

Now that I have briefly outlined this elaborate political classification system, which I think tells us a lot about the mindset of the North Korean leaders and their ideal for a utopian, controlled North Korean society, let me caution that appearance does not match reality.

North Korean society is full of corruption. A North Korean's political history, and the history of his or her parents, grandparents, and even distant relatives, does indeed influence that person's life chances. But what matters even more is money.

North Korea's socialist economy does not work. Most people live in poverty. Millions are constantly hungry. Government and party officials, including members of the several police and party organizations that compile and use this political information, bend the rules to make life better for themselves and their families.

I don't think it is an exaggeration to say that North Korean society runs on bribes. It has become a way of life: a universal tax in a country that boasts that its people are free of taxation. All of the necessities that I mentioned above—employment, food, medical care, housing and place of residence—can be purchased illegally. Protection from arrest or release from jail is likewise for sale. Only if one's case comes to the personal attention of Kim Jong-il, who has everything, is bribery of no use.

In closing, let me suggest what this information about political classification tells us about North Korea's social structure. That structure is broken. North Korea is not in fact a socialist economic system. Almost everyone turns to the underground market economy to survive. There is no rule of law. Only the rule of money and power.

North Korean society is unstable as it lurches from one crisis to the next. But people have become adept at adjusting to circumstances, looking out for themselves and their families, and when possible helping their neighbors and townspeople.

Yet because most North Koreans cannot leave their country, and because none of them can contest the political system, social disorder in North Korea remains largely contained, and will continue to be contained until people become aware of political alternatives to living under the Kim regime.

Thank you.

\*The views expressed in this testimony do not necessarily represent those of the Institute for Defense Analyses or its clients.