For those eager to see North Korea adopt market reforms and open up its economy, it is tempting to point to the example of Myanmar, whose military in 2011 began gradually to relinquish control after having seized power in 1962.

But Steven Kim and Miemie Winn Byrd argue that differences in political systems, geography, history and demographics make it effectively impossible for North Korea to follow the Myanmar way.

THE POLITICAL and economic reforms in Myanmar in recent years have led to speculation about the possibility of similar reforms in North Korea, with key officials in the US and South Korea suggesting that Pyongyang should follow the path taken by Myanmar.

Among those urging such action are US President Barack Obama, in the first ever state visit by a US president to Myanmar in 2012; South Korean President Park Geun-hye during a summit in 2013; key members of the Obama administration including former national security advisor Thomas Donilon,1 former US Ambassador to South Korea Sung Kim and US envoy on North Korean human rights issues Robert King. All have said that by following Myanmar’s example North Korea could gain more trade, greater investment and closer diplomatic ties with the US and the rest of the world.2 This sentiment was echoed by the former South Korean President Lee Myung-bak when he promised to help North Korea revive its economy if it followed Myanmar’s example; he even asked Myanmar’s President Thein Sein to persuade North Korea to follow in its footsteps during his historic visit to Myanmar in 2012.3 Even the Chinese, who have an interest in creating a more stable and viable North Korea, have joined the chorus of voices urging Pyongyang to reform.4

The reason that reforms in Myanmar have raised such high expectations for North Korea is the perceived similarities of the two regimes. As with North Korea today, under military control Myanmar was ruled by a highly secretive, nationalistic and dictatorial clique; it was a pariah due to human rights abuses, and its extremely poor and isolated population suffered under international sanctions. But the reasoning is faulty, because these are two very different societies with contrasting sets of political institutions that have evolved under vastly dissimilar historical, social,

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The reason Myanmar and North Korea have ethnic identity, which enabled the regime to opt for reform, the political system in Myanmar makes it easier for the regime to carry out reforms. While the political system in Myanmar allows for the potential rewards for doing so, are arguably the more tragic when the urgency to reform, and the regime to do the same. This is all the more tragic when the urgency to reform, and the potential rewards for doing so, are arguably even greater for North Korea than for Myanmar.

**DIFFERENT PATHS**

The reason Myanmar and North Korea have taken divergent paths is primarily due to the differences in their political systems and history. On close inspection, the two systems could not be farther apart in terms of government power to fashion the society according to its will. To an extent unrivalled in modern times, the communist party that assumed power in North Korea in 1945 created a totalitarian system that transformed the nation into a rigid, xenophobic and closed society. A unique system was created as the regime sought to control every aspect of people’s lives through propaganda and indoctrination, secret surveillance, and harsh punishment of anybody who challenged the system. It also established a cult of personality to fos- ter unquestioning loyalty and obedience to the supreme ruler of North Korea, Kim Il Sung and his successors. Lastly, the North Korean people were classified into three groups — core, waver- ing and hostile — to ensure that only the members of the core class had access to positions of power and privilege.

To legitimize its totalitarian rule, moreover, the regime created an all-embracing ideology. People were taught that because they faced an incessantly hostile world they needed to give their leader unquestioning loyalty and devotion; eliminate their dependence on the outside world by cultivating the virtues of self-reliance and sac- rifice; and prevent the outside world from con- taminating the racial purity and superiority of the North Korean people. Lastly, the regime did not previously totalitarian government has done in modern history: it cut off its people from contact with the outside world in order to impose total control over information. Therefore, “the creation of totalitarianism in North Korea led to a society that was isolated from the rest of the world, governed by a rigid set of rules regulating every aspect of people’s lives, and viewed its rela- tions to the outside world through a prism of ‘us versus them’ and ‘good versus evil’ mentality.”

The extent to which the regime was successful is evident in that there are no individuals or organized groups within society or the regime capable of opposing or challenging its authority.

**LIMITED POWER FOR MYANMAR’S MILITARY**

Unlike in North Korea, Myanmar’s military was unable to subsume every aspect of society under its control. While the government restricted interaction with the outside world, it could not go to the same extreme as Pyongyang in isolating its people from any external contact or influence. Thus in comparison to the North Korean system, the military’s authoritarian system in Myanmar was far less rigid, xenophobic and isolated.

The military, or Tatmadaw, under the leadership of General Ne Win, came to power in what was then Burma after staging a coup against the country’s democratic government in 1962. To consolidate its power, it advocated a “Burmese Way to Socialism” as an ideology to unify the country and legitimize its rule. It established a socialist economy by expropriating private busi- nesses and followed a policy of economic isola- tion. Furthermore, it severely limited freedom of expression by prohibiting foreign-language pub- lishments and banning privately-owned newspa- pers. It also limited foreign travel by imposing extensive visa restrictions on its citizens traveling abroad as well as on foreigners visiting Myanmar. In addition, it encouraged national- ism, especially among the ethnic majority Bama (Burmans) as a way of unifying the country. This strategy, however, contributed towards dividing rather than uniting the country by privileging the Bama ethnic majority.

The military government, moreover, was quite ruthless in suppressing ethnic insurgen- cies, intermittent outbursts of political dissent and sporadic protests throughout its half-century reign. It was challenged by student uprisings in 1974 and again in 1988; by a landslide victory for the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) in the 1990 election, which the regime later nullified; and by the “Saffron Revolution” led by monks in 2007. Lastly, the regime was faced with a determined political opposition led by Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, who came to symbolize the Myanmar people’s struggle for democracy. While the military was able to hold on to power and exert a dominating influence over society, it was nowhere near as effective as the North Korean regime in fashion- ing the entire society according to its will.

**In North Korea, the communist regime was dealing with a homogenous population with a common cultural and ethnic identity, which enabled the regime to unite the people by encouraging a strong sense of xenophobic nationalism.**

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Myanmar’s heterogeneous society severely impeded the regime from unifying the country under its sole control.

Society was not only fragmented, but also considerable tension and conflict existed between the different groups.

The reason North Korea and Myanmar created two different political systems is because the two regimes differed in the resources they had available to realize their goal. The different social composition, historical legacy, and geographical features of the two countries favored the creation of a totalitarian system in North Korea and an authoritarian system in Myanmar. In fact, the unique set of factors that contributed to a monolithic system in North Korea was largely absent in Myanmar. In North Korea, the communist regime was dealing with a homogenous population with a common cultural and ethnic identity, which enabled the regime to unite the people by encouraging a strong sense of xenophobic nationalism. By making the people believe that the regime was the ultimate guardian of the nation in a hostile world, it gained the legitimacy to assert its control over society. Its relatively compact territory; with clearly defined and closely guarded borders, also enabled the regime to monitor and control the population more easily.

In contrast, Myanmar’s heterogeneous society severely impeded the regime from unifying the country under its sole control. Society in Myanmar was not only fragmented along ethnic, religious and cultural lines, but also considerable tension and conflict existed between the different groups. Two-thirds of the population consisted of the Bama majority, who are Buddhist, while one-third consisted of an estimated 135 ethnic groups who are mostly Christian, with a small minority who are Muslim. While historically there has been intermittent conflict between the Bama majority and ethnic minorities, British colonial rule helped to intensify the divisions. During the colonial period, Britain’s “divide and rule” strategy privileged the minorities and generated enormous resentment among the majority Burmans. This resentment, in turn, magnified the differing ethnic identities and promoted distrust. The ethnic tensions exploded into armed conflict between the central government and ethnic minorities soon after Myanmar gained independence in 1948, which makes the conflict, now going on for 60 years, the longest ethnic insurgency in the world. Ethnic tensions have prevented the development of a unifying national identity.

The ethnic and cultural diversity that has evolved for over 1,000 years has also been reinforced by Myanmar’s diverse geographical features — high plateaus and lowland areas separated by the Irrawaddy and Sittaung rivers. The culture and language of the people who lived in wet, rice-producing tropical lowlands diverged over time from those who lived in the more demanding habitat of hills and plateaus and along the expansive coastal region. While the Bama majority mostly occupied the Irrawaddy plains, various minority ethnic groups inhabited the plateaux and the borderlands. These differences facilitated the development of separate ethnic identities.

**KOREA’S HISTORICAL ISOLATION**

Unlike Myanmar, Korea experienced not only greater isolation from the rest of the world, but also a greater degree of autocratic rule during the formative period of its modern history. Before Korea’s self-rule came to an end in 1910, the last and longest-reigning Korean royal dynasty — the Choson Dynasty (1392-1897) — pursued a policy of isolation, limiting trade and even sea fishing. In fact, as Korea was gradually forced to open up by external powers in the latter part of the 19th century, the long, self-imposed isolation led foreigners to label Korea the “hermit kingdom.”

In 1910, Japan forcibly annexed Korea (1910-1945) after overthrowing the Choson Dynasty. The Japanese colonial rulers created a strong, repressive state that was even more intrusive and far-reaching in its powers than the Korean monarchies. It sought to control every aspect of society, suppress Korean identity and transform Koreans into loyal and obedient Japanese subjects. As a result, the historical legacy of Korea has aided the North Korean regime in creating a totalitarian state. Its geographical location as a peninsula surrounded on three sides by ocean, with a land border with China to the north, also added to Korea’s isolation.

Even though Myanmar also has a history of absolute monarchies and colonial rule, Myanmar did not experience the kind of isolation and autocratic rule that characterized Korea’s history. Unlike Korea, Myanmar interacted with the outside world through trade and diplomacy, which was facilitated by its geographical location. Myanmar not only has a substantial landmass of 678,000 square kilometers, but it also shares nearly 6,000 kilometers of borders with China, India, Thailand, Laos and Bangladesh. Additionally, Myanmar’s strategic location along the Bay of Bengal facing the Andaman Sea at the entrance to the vital Malacca Strait encouraged trade with numerous foreign merchants who came there to conduct business since the 14th century. The extent of Myanmar’s interaction with the outside world was reflected in the fact...
that Myanmar’s kings fought wars using Portuguese and French mercenaries. Lastly, the British colonial rulers were far less autocratic than the Japanese in Korea.

This interaction with the outside world continued into the post-World War II period as Yangon (formerly Rangoon), the commercial and political capital, served as one of the trade hubs of Asia until the military coup in 1962. Although Myanmar has been largely isolated from the West for the past 50 years, the country had an active relationship with the West before and during the British colonial period. The recent isolation of Myanmar under military rule is an exception rather than the rule. As a consequence, in Myanmar all the conditions conducive to the creation of the totalitarian system in North Korea were largely absent.

REFORM AND PERISH

The vastly different circumstances of their political systems helps explain the choices the two countries have made on reform and opening up. In making this decision, the form of government determines whether the advantages of reform are going to outweigh the disadvantages. The authoritarian system of government in Myanmar makes the choice easier because the benefits outweigh the costs, whereas the totalitarian system in North Korea is inherently biased in favor of maintaining the status quo. It is as if the North Koreans are unwittingly trapped in an iron cage of their own making."14 The system is now profoundly dysfunctional, because fear of regime collapse is preventing the reforms needed to overcome a systemic crisis.

Despite this, the regime has allowed limited economic reform and opening to prevent further deterioration in its economic situation. It has permitted the existence of informal markets that sprang up after the government could no longer provide food rations to keep its people alive in the mid-1990s. The collapse of the public distribution system forced people to turn to the market to exchange goods and services to meet their basic needs.25 To earn hard currency, the regime allowed special economic zones to encourage foreign investment while taking stringent measures to isolate these zones from the rest of North Korea society.26

In addition, it has sought to promote tourism and export its laborers to foreign countries. It also sought to extract aid from the participating countries in the Six-Party Talks, which were convened in 2003 to seek a negotiated settlement of the North Korean nuclear issue, as well as other members of the international community. In this way, North Korea has chosen to ensure the survival of its totalitarian system by “muddling through” rather than opening up.27

While even this muddling through may not be a viable long-term solution to the economic crisis, it is the least dangerous option available to the regime without having to take measures that could threaten its survival. It also enables the regime to buy time until it can create more favorable external circumstances to improve its economy without having to resort to potentially destabilizing reforms.

In contrast to the excruciating dilemma faced by the North Korean regime, the Myanmar military regime was not confronted with a stark tradeoff between reform and regime survival. The authoritarian system in Myanmar had relatively greater latitude to change, since change could be accommodated without causing its total collapse. After more than four decades of harsh military rule, the regime in Myanmar decided to reform and open up, because the regime understood its dictatorial rule was not sustainable and the advantages of deliberate reforms far outweighed the disadvantages. By instituting controlled reforms, the regime could revive the economy by ending international sanctions and reducing its dependence on China, at the same time strengthening its domestic legitimacy by allowing the political opposition a role in government. The only major risk from the reforms was the possibility that growing popular pressure for democratization could bring an end to military predominance. But even this risk can be mitigated if the military is able to remain in control of the reform process to ensure that its vital interests are not unduly compromised. Therefore, not only do the benefits of reform far exceed the costs, the attendant risks can be managed.28 The reforms pose a danger to the regime, but they are not life-threatening in the way in which reforms would fundamentally threaten the survival of the regime in North Korea.

The superficial similarities between Myanmar and North Korea belie the deep institutional differences that separate these two societies. Insofar as these structural differences impose different constraints, the cost-benefit analysis of carrying out reform will be different for the two regimes. Given a particular set of constraints, if the potential benefits of reform outweigh the dangers, one is likely to reform. However, with a different set of constraints, even if the potential benefits of reform are considerable, those gains will be meaningless if the reforms threaten the survival of the regime. In short, because the cost-benefit analysis is different for the two regimes, the decision made by Myanmar cannot be replicated by North Korea.

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14 Steven Kim, op. cit. p.194.