

Marked for Life:  
**Songbun**  
North Korea's Social  
Classification System



**Robert Collins**

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**The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea**  
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202-499-7973 [www.hrnk.org](http://www.hrnk.org)

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Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 0985648007

Library of Congress Control Number: 2012939299

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Collins, who has lived and worked in South Korea for over three decades, has met with and interviewed North Korean defectors and refugees since the 1970's. Mr. Collins received his Master's Degree from a Korean-language program in international politics from Dankook University in Seoul in 1988. He is a 37-year-veteran of the U.S. Department of Defense. His professional focus during that period was political analysis of North Korea and Northeast Asian security issues. After retiring from the Department of Defense, Mr. Collins continued conducting research on the Kim regime's political structure using Korean-language sources at major Korean libraries and think tanks, as well as through interviews with over 75 North Korean refugees. This report is based on that research. The author dedicates it to those refugees.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study owes a great deal to the dedication and hard work of many people. The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea had the support of a major private foundation, which made this extensive research project possible. No funds from any government were used in the preparation of this report. The Committee also

benefitted from a number of generous private donors, some of whom are members of our Board, and others who are not.

The printing of this report was paid for by private contributions made in memory of a member of our Board of Directors, Jaehoon Ahn, a North Korean defector whose distinguished career included the extraordinary achievement of being the founding director of the Korean service of Radio Free Asia. His personal dedication to revealing the truth about North Korea continues to inspire his colleagues in Washington and many of his fellow defectors in Seoul.

The Committee's aim is to present a comprehensive report that takes into account all known information about North Korea's highly discriminatory political stratification system called *songbun*. We were very fortunate to be able to engage as the author of this report Mr. Robert Collins, whose decades of service to the United States Government in Korea brought him into contact with North Koreans who had found their way to Seoul as early as the 1970s. An American whose knowledge of North Korean politics and proficiency in the Korean language permits him to engage in in-depth discussions with defectors and conduct research in major Korean archives, Robert Collins

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has prepared a study that should enlighten the world about *songbun*.

The Committee is particularly grateful for the contribution of the late Congressman Stephen J. Solarz, its former Co-Chair. He understood that, in order to comprehend the nature of North Korea's deeply entrenched pattern of human rights violations, one had to grasp the true nature of *songbun*. Few politicians knew the term *songbun*, but Stephen Solarz did. He also was struck by similarities between North Korea's *songbun* and South Africa's system of *apartheid*, which although different, are both based on the inequality of people. Having long campaigned against the system of racial segregation in South Africa, when turning to North Korea, Stephen Solarz saw how *songbun* also created deep divisions in society, and prevented people from sharing the same opportunities and from exercising their basic human rights. Under both systems, inequality is assigned at birth, perpetuated throughout a person's lifetime and cruelly enforced by those in power to benefit themselves and their supporters.

The contributions of time and effort of Members of the Board of Directors are not usually mentioned in our reports, but Co-Chair Roberta Cohen and Helen-Louise Hunter deserve special mention here, because their close reading and

study of the text helped make it the important exposé it is. Appreciation also goes to former Co-Chair and founding Board member Richard V. Allen, who strongly promoted the *songbun* report and gave priority attention to reviewing it. The report was completed under the management of Chuck Downs, former executive director of the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, whose contributions were essential to the success of this endeavor.

A number of highly talented interns have volunteered to work with the Committee while they pursue academic studies in Washington. Nine who contributed their fine research, writing, and editing abilities to this report—Jason Keller, Nicholas Craft, Samantha Letizia, Maria Kim, Hannah Barker, Mintaro Oba, Rosa Park, Hyungchang (Vincent) Lee and James Do—deserve special mention for their work on drafts of this report. Rosa Park's graphic artistic skills and talent enhance the pages of this report, and are demonstrated in the design of its cover.

**Greg Scarlatoiu**

*Executive Director*

Committee for Human Rights in North Korea  
June 6, 2012

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*Robert Collins*

## FOREWORD

The North Korean government is one of the few totalitarian regimes remaining in the world. Even Cuba, one of the other remaining totalitarian regimes, is beginning to liberalize its economy however reluctantly, while it maintains total control over its political and social systems. A totalitarian regime in this context may be defined as a government where every aspect of human life is controlled and ordered by the state to further the political objectives of the ruling elite. In an authoritarian state—while repressive and often brutal—people are generally allowed some measure of control over their private lives, as long as they do not threaten the power structure and existing order. The North Korean government has the notable distinction of being one of the most brutal, repressive, and controlled political systems of the past century.

North Korean totalitarianism is maintained through several powerful means of social control, the most elaborate and intrusive of which is the *songbun* classification system. The *songbun* system in some ways resembles the *apartheid* race-based classification system of South Africa. *Songbun* subdivides the population of the country into 51 categories or ranks of trustworthiness and loyalty to the Kim family and North Korean state. These many catego-

ries are grouped into three broad castes: the core, wavering, and hostile classes. Kim Il-sung gave a public speech in 1958 in which he reported that the core class represented 25%, wavering class 55%, and hostile class 20% of the population.

These three classes may have affected how families fared during the Great Famine of the 1990s, which Hwang Jang-yop—the regime's chief party ideologue who defected to South Korea in 1997—estimated may have killed 3.5 million North Koreans. In mid-1998 the World Food Program, UNICEF, Save the Children, and the European Union conducted the first country-wide survey of the nutritional condition of North Korean children. They reported that 32% of the children showed no evidence of malnutrition, 62% suffered from moderate malnutrition, and 16% suffered from severe acute malnutrition, with an error rate of 5%. While the survey had its limitations because of restrictions placed on the effort by the North Korean state, it is noteworthy that the size of the three social classes is about the same as the size of the nutritional categories. If the regime was feeding people through the public distribution system based on their *songbun* classification, it would be reflected in the nutritional data; and the data does show considerable coincidence. In the context of the famine, *songbun* may have determined who lived and who



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died, who ate well and who starved, and whose children suffered permanent physical (through stunting) and intellectual damage (prolonged acute malnutrition lowers IQ levels) from acute severe malnutrition. We have some evidence that the *songbun* system determined ration levels in the public distribution system which fed the country from the founding of the North Korean state until the deterioration of the system during the famine and its ultimate collapse.

What is most remarkable about the *songbun* system is how long it has been in existence with so little outside scrutiny focused on it. One of the Board members of the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, Helen-Louise Hunter, is one of the first western scholars to write extensively on the subject in her book published in 1998, *Kim Il Song's North Korea*. Her book is based on classified research she had done for U.S. intelligence agencies, which was later declassified so it could be published. The failure of the human rights community, the United Nations agencies, and outside scholars of North Korea may be attributed to the closed nature of the North Korean system, but it may also be a result of a reluctance to believe earlier anecdotal reports of how repressive this system was. Some non-governmental organizations and aid workers early in the outside world's understanding of the famine thought that

the North Korean food distribution system was a socially equitable means of reducing famine deaths by distributing food equally for everyone. No one reading this report on the *songbun* system could reach any such misguided conclusion today on the nature of the North Korean regime, its use of *songbun* as a means for its own survival, and its ongoing systematic punishment of those who are at the bottom of the stratified system. It is only unfortunate the Committee on Human Rights in North Korea and Robert Collins' fine research did not exist before the Great Famine, as it might have informed the food aid programs and saved the lives of the people with low status.

The strongest and most passionate advocate among our Board colleagues of the research, which led to this report, was the late Steven J. Solarz, former co-chairman of the Committee, former Member of Congress from New York and the only one among the Board members to have met with Kim Il-sung. Steve insisted that the study should set a high standard of scholarly evidence. We also pay tribute to our late colleague, Ahn Jaehoon, a North Korean by birth, journalist and founding director of Radio Free Asia's Korean language service. The report is a great tribute to these fine men.

The Board also commends the leadership of its former Executive Director, Chuck Downs, in bringing this report to completion. Mr. Downs, a founding director of HRNK, spent many hours in honing this final version, as he did in other reports during his tenure.

**Andrew Natsios**

*Co-Chair*

Committee for Human Rights in North  
Korea Board of Directors

June 6, 2012

## GLOSSARY

Acronym of Korean Word	Term	Comment
DPRK	Democratic People's Republic of Korea (Chosun Minjujuui Inmin Gonghwakuk)	Official name of North Korea; founded September 9, 1948
DPS	Department of Public Security (Inmin Boanbu)	The national police; formerly known as the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Public Security Department, State Safety Agency, and most recently, until September 2010, Ministry of Public Security (see below)
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights	Promulgated by the United Nations in 1966, NK acceded to this on September 14, 1981
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights	Promulgated by the United Nations in 1966, NK acceded to this on September 14, 1981
KPA	Korean People's Army (Inmingun)	North Korean military, which includes naval and air force components
Kwan-li-so	Management Site	Political Prison Camp; the most notorious of four levels of NK prisons
KWP or Party	Korean Workers' Party (Chosun Nodongdang)	Ruling party of North Korea that rules over the state apparatus; other parties are front parties without political power
MPS	Ministry of Public Security (Inmin Boanseong)	Most commonly used name for the DPS (Department of Public Security)
MSC	Military Security Command (Bowi Saryeongbu)	Conducts internal security and counterintelligence missions inside the military, similar to that done by the SSD. It is also responsible for counter-coup d'état operations

Acronym of Korean Word	Term	Comment
NDC	National Defense Commission (Gukbang Wiwonhoe)	A military organization that is the highest executive organ governing the North Korean Government
NK	North Korea (Bukhan in South Korea and Bukchosun in NK)	Common acronym that refers to the DPRK
NKPCC	North Korean Provisional People's Committee	Operating under the Soviet Civil Authority, forerunner to the DPRK state, formed in February 1946, led by Kim Il-sung.
OGD	Organization and Guidance Department	Most influential organization in the KWP; a department within the KWP Secretariat; issued all policy guidance in the name of Kim Jong-il, now under Kim Jong-un
PDS	Public Distribution System	State-directed distribution of food, clothing and other life necessities; normally tied to the workplace. Failed in the mid to late 1990's leading to mass starvation; restarted but collapsed again in the mid-2000s
ROK	Republic of Korea	Official name of South Korea, founded 15 August 1948
SPA	Supreme People's Assembly (Choego Inmin Hoeui)	Highest legislative body in North Korea
SSD	State Security Department (Gukga Anjeon Bo-wi-bu)	SSD is the North Korean secret police; also referred to as the State Security Agency or the National Security Protection Agency and increasingly in South Korea as the NSA
Suryeong	Leader	Title given to Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il; connotes the ultimate single leader of the entire nation state

## VII

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## I. INTRODUCTION:

“Marked For Life” is not an exaggerated term for the socio-political classification conditions under which every North Korean citizen lives out his life; it is a cruel and persistent reality for the millions who must experience it on a daily basis. North Korea’s socio-political classification system, or “*songbun*,” has an impact on human rights in North Korea that is incalculable and interminable in its highly destructive and repressive effects on the vast multitude of the North Korean population. Focused on origin of birth, this party-directed “caste system” is the root cause of discrimination and humanitarian abuses. The grim reality of North Korea is that this system creates a form of slave labor for a third of North Korea’s population of 23 million citizens and loyalty-bound servants out of the remainder.

Millions of North Koreans must suffer through the associated myriad of human rights abuses that *songbun* brings to their daily lives. Article two of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights specifically states that every individual is entitled to rights outlined in the declaration “without distinction of...race...social origin...or birth.”<sup>1</sup> But for the North Korean

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1 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, URL: <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>.

regime, this system is a deliberate state policy of discrimination.

As former Congressman Stephen J. Solarz observed in his foreword to Helen-Louise Hunter’s book, *Kim Il-song’s North Korea*, North Korean society exists “somewhere between subservience and slavery.”<sup>2</sup> Ms. Hunter’s book was one of the first English-language books to identify the rigid stratifications in North Korean society and provide an English language catalogue of human rights abuses based on the *songbun* socio-political classification system. This report is designed to build upon that ground-breaking work.

The institution of *songbun* means that each and every North Korean citizen is assigned a heredity-based class and socio-political rank over which the individual exercises no control but which determines all aspects of his or her life. Under this classification system, all citizens become part of one of three designated classes—the ‘core’ or loyal class, the ‘wavering’ class, or the ‘hostile’ class. The designations enable the Kim regime<sup>3</sup> to establish and reinforce

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2 Stephen J. Solarz, Foreword, in Helen-Louise Hunter, *Kim Il-song’s North Korea* (Connecticut: Praeger, 1999), p. ix.

3 The term “Kim regime” or “Kim family regime” refers to the totalitarian system established through force, socio-politico-economic policies, and cult of personality by Kim Il-sung and expand-

its political control over all North Korean society. The classifications are based on socio-political judgments which empower the party-state at the expense of the individual's civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.

Akin to the class distinctions of ancient feudal systems, but with important differences, *songbun* provides extensive privileges to those deemed loyal, based largely on their birth and family background, and metes out pervasive disadvantages to those deemed disloyal. This creation of favored and disfavored classes of people based on their perceived support of the regime is reminiscent of Stalin's efforts to brand landowners, capitalists, and independent farmers as enemies of the state in order to destroy their influence and consolidate Soviet power.

The *songbun* system is calculated to have an impact on every individual in North Korea. Indeed, the adults in each family are aware of the opportunities that will be offered to its members or denied them based on their political classification. This party-directed "caste system" guarantees there is no level playing field in North Korea—politically, economically, or socially.

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ed by Kim Jong-il. The Kim regime also includes the political elite and their political, military, security and economic institutions designed to maintain their power.

Social rankings and class divisions characterize many human societies, but modern human rights standards have sought to diminish their impact. North Korea's *songbun*, a state-directed system of discrimination, violates three key international rights accords:

- **The Universal Declaration of Human Rights**,<sup>4</sup> which states "*All are equal before the law and are entitled **without any discrimination** to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to **equal protection against any discrimination** in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such **discrimination**;*"
- **The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)**, which says "***All persons are equal before the law** and are entitled **without any discrimination** to the equal protection of the law. In this respect, the law shall **prohibit any discrimination** and guarantee to all persons equal and effective **protection against discrimination** on any ground such as race, color, sex, language, religion, **political or other opinion**, national or **social origin**, property, birth or other status;*" and
- **The International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights**

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<sup>4</sup> Adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 10, 1948 and now considered part of customary international law.

(ICESCR), which says “The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to guarantee that the rights enunciated in the present Covenant will be exercised **without discrimination of any kind** as to race, color, sex, language, religion, **political or other opinion**, national or **social origin**, property, **birth or other status**.” [emphasis added]

Though the North Korean regime denies that such a discriminatory societal stratification system exists, the evidence proves otherwise. The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea has obtained a copy of the 1993 Manual issued by North Korea's Ministry of Public Security (MPS) that instructs its investigators and officials on how to investigate their fellow citizens' *songbun*. Entitled, “Resident Registration Project Reference Manual,” it consists of instructions on whom to enfranchise and whom to disenfranchise. Each section begins with the personal instructions of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il on the importance of differentiating people on the basis of loyalty. This Manual, never before translated into and described in English, is discussed at length in Part IV, and demonstrates clearly how deeply entrenched the institution of *songbun* is. The MPS, the national police force, maintains a file on every person from the age of 17. These records are permanent and are updated every two years.

Though North Korean diplomats consistently deny class discrimination at international venues, the North Korean Regime does not completely hide its class discrimination. In an editorial in North Korea's main newspaper, it states, “We do not hide our class-consciousness just like we do not hide our party-consciousness. Socialist human rights are not supra-class human rights that grant freedom and rights to hostile elements who oppose socialism and to impure elements who violate the interests of the People.”<sup>5</sup> As we shall see later in this report, hostile elements are those North Koreans who are classified at the lowest levels of *songbun* based on their perceived hostility to the Kim regime.

The regime itself produced a movie entitled “Guarantee” that explains the *songbun* system. Produced in 1987, the movie portrays the suffering a poor worker faces because of his poor *songbun* classification due to having family members living in South Korea.<sup>6</sup>

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5 Chamdaun Inkweoneul Onghohayeo (For the Protection of True Human Rights), “Rodong Sinmun (Workers' Daily), 24 June 1995; as quoted in Kim Soo-Am, *Conceptions of Democracy and Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea*, Ministry of National Unification, 2008. URL: [http://www.kinu.or.kr/eng/pub/pub\\_02\\_01.jsp?page=5&num=53&mode=view&field=&text=&order=&dir=&bid=DATA05&ses=](http://www.kinu.or.kr/eng/pub/pub_02_01.jsp?page=5&num=53&mode=view&field=&text=&order=&dir=&bid=DATA05&ses=)

6 1996 *White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea* (Seoul: Korea Institute of National Unification, 1996).

For their part, North Korean citizens are generally aware that they are classified into different social classes. When 100 refugees were asked by the Republic of Korea's Korean Bar Association whether they were aware of the regime's classification system, 89 of them responded yes. Not only that, but they were aware of which backgrounds make up the hostile class and were also aware that those are seen as enemies of the state.<sup>7</sup> As one would expect, such a system breeds considerable discontent and resentment among those who are disadvantaged through no fault of their own.

Dark humor and slang even have developed around the *songbun* classification system. It is common, for example, for individuals in the lower *songbun* class to tease one another that he or she is a "todae nappun saekki" or "*songbun* nappun saekki," translated as "you rotten *songbun* S.O.B." Those with higher *songbun*—the "core class"—are often referred to as "tomatoes," which are red on both the outside and inside and are thus good communists; those in the middle *songbun* class, or "wavering class," are referred to as "apples", which are red on the outside and white on the inside and considered in need of political education; and those of lower *songbun*, the "hostile class," are

referred to as "grapes" and are considered politically unredeemable.<sup>8</sup>

Numerous interviews of defectors reveal that those who are young when they leave North Korea perceive *songbun* as being of decreasing importance—though not eliminated—whereas those who are older—late 30's and above—emphatically insist that *songbun* does still matter. A youthful lack of life's experiences could be expected to decrease a person's awareness of the role *songbun* plays. Those who experience accumulated discrimination over a period of time, particularly if that discrimination affects one's one's education, employment and one's dependents, will be more aware of the harm *songbun* has caused in their lives.

Some analysts suggest that *songbun* has weakened since the famine of the 1990s and the collapse of the Public Distribution System (PDS), and that money and bribery have replaced *songbun*'s dynamics. There is no doubt that the general failure of the North Korean economy has created conditions for individual economic initiative and pervasive corruption. Tolerated market activity has provided alternatives to the regime's PDS that once supplied most of the country with food and daily necessities. These burgeoning markets, born of necessity with the state's inability

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7 2008 White Paper (KBA), 496-497.

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8 Hunter, *Kim Il-song's North Korea*, 4.

to feed its people, have indeed provided new opportunities and individuals in most categories of *songbun* have been able to earn some money through their own initiative. Purchasing power and ability to bribe have helped those of the lower *songbun* classes to overcome—to a limited degree—restrictions placed upon them by *songbun*. Buying or bribing one's way out of police trouble or into colleges, receiving better medical attention, purchasing better housing, or obtaining food has not eliminated the negative impacts of *songbun*, but it has provided some alternative avenues for survival.

Yet this does not change the significance of *songbun*. It does not change, for example, the assignment of lower *songbun* citizens to menial and heavy-labor jobs. It does not change how their parents experienced pervasive discrimination which influenced where they grew up in lower-class housing, nor does it change the poorer diet or medical care available to them their entire lives. It does not give lower *songbun* classes access to positions of influence. It does not change who makes policy or makes critical decisions—that remains the prerogative of those with high *songbun*. And it has not stopped *songbun* investigations of every single North Korean citizen and the resulting classification into a *songbun* category. It is still those of the higher *songbun* who decide distribution

priorities, and it is high *songbun* people who receive the bribes. Worse, it does not change the fact that opportunity was and is denied them based on *songbun*.

*Songbun* has changed with the times, but the Kim regime has not abandoned this policy. In many ways, as we will see later in this report, it is even more insidious than before, now that all the information on each individual's *songbun* has been digitalized for use by the regime in integrating *songbun* data with social, legal, criminal, and political data. Furthermore, there is no indication whatsoever that after Kim Jong-il's death in December 2011 that the party-state's *songbun* policy will change and there were no changes during the three-year succession transition process prior to that. Changes in the *songbun* policy would undoubtedly be viewed as a direct threat to North Korea's elite who benefit most from the system. That would be highly detrimental to Kim Jong-un's power consolidation process. If anything, the Kim regime's new leadership has demonstrated entrenchment in domestic and foreign policies focused on regime security and survival.

## II. THE WORD *SONGBUN* CONNOTES AN INDIVIDUAL'S VALUE

The Korean word "*songbun*" means "ingredients" or material (as in substance or makeup). The North Korean political structure uses the word to refer to one's socio-political background. It has established two types of *songbun*: "*chulsin songbun*," or *songbun* based in origins, which refers to the socio-economic background of one's family, including that of one's parents, siblings, grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins; and "*sahoe songbun*," or societal *songbun*, which refers to one's individual socio-political and economic behavior and performance. Another word associated with class background is "*todaye*," a more general reference, which is almost the same, and used interchangeably with "*chulsin songbun*," or foundation.

The North Korean regime, which controls all of the country's information systems, including all publications through the Korean Workers' Party's Propaganda and Agitation Department,<sup>9</sup> provides a definition of *songbun* in its "Great Dictionary of the North Korean Language (*Chosun Mal Daesajon*)."<sup>10</sup> It states:

<sup>9</sup> There are no private legal publications in North Korea.

**People are socially categorized based on social class relations. Each person is heavily influenced in his or her class ideology through his or her ideological background. Each is socially classified based on origin, occupation and lifestyle, which provides an understanding of one's class ideology. A person's *songbun* is not completely static; it can change with life's environment and conditions.**<sup>10</sup>

One of the North Korean regime's primary objectives for the *songbun* system is to isolate and/or eliminate perceived internal political threats. The *songbun* system identifies, assesses, categorizes, and politically stratifies each North Korean resident as a political asset or liability to the socialist revolution and the regime in general and to the ruling Kim family specifically. Whereas other societies have practiced discrimination based on race, religion, and other factors, the primary source of discrimination in North Korean society is defined by the regime to be one's presumed value as friend or foe to the Kim regime.

The **core (*haeksim*) class** is assessed by the regime to be loyal to the Kim regime and therefore receives significant privileges in all aspects of life. Members of the

<sup>10</sup> *Chosun Mal Taesajon* Vol. 1 (Pyongyang: Sociology Publishing Company, 1992), 1762.

core class overwhelmingly tend to serve in positions that sustain and protect the Kim regime. The core class, with its high political reliability rating, is given priority in every known social welfare and support category, whether employment, education, housing, medical treatment, or food and the provision of life's necessities.

The **wavering (dongyo) class** is made up of those whose loyalty to the party is deemed questionable but who can serve the regime well through proper economic and political performance, particularly if they demonstrate loyalty to the party and its leaders. The party assesses that constant ideological indoctrination is essential to maintaining the reliability of the wavering class.

The lowest level, the **hostile (choktae) class**, is prejudged as being disloyal to the socialist revolution, the party, and its leadership. The hostile class is commonly referred to as "impure elements" or "anti-party and anti-revolutionary forces." Members of this class are regarded as class enemies by the Kim regime, and they suffer the most traumatic victimization of the *songbun* system. They are discriminated against in terms of employment, military service, education, food, housing, medical care, and especially opportunity. Marrying someone of low *songbun* is unthinkable for someone in the core group. Essentially

a rigid caste system, *songbun* leaves most North Koreans with little-to-no hope for reward for personal initiative and very little room for personal choice. It is very difficult to improve one's *songbun*, particularly if it derives from one's family's pre-revolutionary class status or the behavior of one's parents or relatives.<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, it is possible for one's *songbun* to change dramatically, particularly falling from a good *songbun* background to a bad *songbun* background. One's *songbun* can be downgraded for committing offenses, political or criminal, or even failing to cooperate with party, government, or economic management officials. Conviction of a political crime—particularly slander or action against the Kim regime—will not only cause one's *songbun* level to fall to rock bottom, but so will that of one's family members up to third-degree relatives, which will last for generations. Regardless of one's *songbun*, such political crimes result in imprisonment for the individual together with three generations of his/her family and, possibly execution. At a minimum, such crimes result in loss of job, housing and other privileges based on *songbun* for oneself and one's extended family. This is not uncommon. Moving up in *songbun* category

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11 Robert L. Worden, ed., *North Korea: a country study*, 5th edition (U.S. Government Printing Office, 2008), 78.

requires a lifetime of devotion to the Kim family regime, the party, and their teachings, but these occasions are not common. Specific *songbun* classes and categories will be discussed in detail later in this report and the extensive categorization of the North Korean citizenry is detailed in Appendices A through E.

### **III. SONGBUN WAS DEVELOPED AS A MEANS OF CLASS WARFARE**

#### ***Songbun and Its Roots***

For the people of North Korea, there is no historical tradition of human rights or individual liberties. A predominantly homogeneous race with a unique language and culture, the Korean people progressed from 500 years under a feudal kingdom to 35 years of colonial subservience under Japan (1910–1945). Pre-colonial Korean society under the Chosun Dynasty maintained a strict Confucianism-based social stratification of the gentry class (*Yangban* in Korean), commoners, and slaves/servants. At the end of World War II, after the United States and its allies defeated Japan, initial administrative jurisdiction over the Korean Peninsula was split for administrative recovery between the victorious allies—the Soviet Union in the North and the United States in the South. Attempts to develop a unified Korea under the two administrations failed, and when the Constitution of the Republic of Korea was put to a vote in the South on May 10, 1948, the Soviet Civil Authority in the North did not permit the North Korean public to vote. The North adopted a constitution of its own, Kim Il-sung was appointed premier, and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) was established

on September 9, 1948. The development of communist institutions in the North left the people of North Korea with no opportunity to exercise democratic rights. The North Korean state, founded under Soviet influence, emerged with a Soviet system of Stalinist dictatorship.

Contemporary North Korean historians characterize the period from liberation to the founding of the DPRK as the period of "anti-imperialist, anti-feudal democratic revolution" that preceded the period of "true socialist revolution."<sup>12</sup> The former period was under the domination and guidance of the Soviet Civil Authority in Korea; the latter came about under Kim Il-sung's leadership.

Even before the founding of the DPRK, North Korean leaders began implementing a social class restructuring to reverse the old Confucian feudal system of the Chosun Dynasty and Japanese colonialism to one that sought to empower the working class. The stated objective was to elevate peasants and laborers to societal leadership positions at the expense of landlords, businessmen, and religious leaders. The population of North Korea,

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12 Ch'oe Yong-hwan, "The Northern Democratic Base in Post-Liberation Korean Revolution," *Ryoksa Kwahak* 10 (1955), as cited in Charles K. Armstrong, "The Name, Origins and Development of the North Korean State," in *The North Korean system in the Post-Cold War Era*, ed. Samuel S. Kim (NY: Palgrave, 2001), 47.

80% peasant at the time,<sup>13</sup> undoubtedly saw this as an attractive policy at the time. Far from creating a classless society, however, this societal restructuring eventually created class differences significantly greater than those found in Korean history or contemporary capitalist countries.

This socio-political re-classification essentially reversed the class structure present in Korean society up to 1945. In a "top-down, bottom up" reorganization,<sup>14</sup> those previously relegated to the bottom of Korean society were elevated, and those at the top were reclassified as enemies of the revolution. Through the institutionalization of *songbun*, this social restructuring sought to empower the poor and marginalize the previous dominant classes. In short, it was a revolution in social priorities.

After the war, under Soviet Civil Authority, North Korean communists began to revolutionize Korean society. As in other communist revolutions, the stated intent was to create a society of complete social equality.<sup>15</sup> The first two main objectives

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13 Kim Yong-gi, "Kyechung Pulpyongdung Kucho-wa Kyechung Chongchaek (Class Inequality Structure and Class Policy)" in Ko Hyun-ok et al, [P] *Bukhan Sahoe-ui Pyonhwa (North Korean Society's Structure and Change)* (Seoul: Kyongnam University Far East Studies Research Institute, 1990); p. 196.

14 Charles Armstrong, *The North Korean Revolution: 1945-1950*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 72-74.

15 Lee Song Ro, *North Korea's Societal In-*

were land reform and societal restructuring. Landlords, capitalists, merchants, supporters of the Japanese colonial administration, and religious persons (of all religions) were targeted for exclusion from the new society, and their assets were confiscated. Millions from these classes fled to South Korea; their relatives who remained in North Korea suffered persecution (or severe discrimination) and were eventually exiled by the party-state to isolated mountain areas in northern areas of North Korea.<sup>16</sup>

On 8 February 1946, the North Korean Provisional People's Committees (NKPPC, whose Chairman was Kim Il-sung) began to implement policies to "rid the country of Japanese imperialism." This was designed to put power in the hands of workers, peasants, and patriotic intellectuals and was intended to eliminate the influence of pro-Japanese elements and landlords.<sup>17</sup>

The administrators in place in North Korea at the time of liberation from Japan in August of 1945 were all purged because of their affiliation with the Japanese colonial administration under the NKPPC decree "Classification of Pro-Japan and Anti-Korean Elements" of 7 March 1946.<sup>18</sup>

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*equality Structure*, 37.

16 Kim Yong-gu, "North Korean Residents' *Songbun*," 70-75.

17 Kim Yong-gi, "Class Inequality Structure and Class Policy," 199.

18 Lee Song Ro, *North Korea's Societal In-*

The Soviets conducted quick background investigations of all prospective provisional North Korean government personnel to replace Japan's colonial administrators.

It was necessary to train new personnel to run the country. Though they were not the leaders of the socialist revolution who came into the country at Soviet direction or as part of Japanese resistance forces such as the *Partisan/Ppalchisan* group under Kim Il-sung, these recruits were essentially the first to be classified by regime leaders as those with the proper background, or "good" *songbun*. They were put through short training courses and deployed throughout North Korea.

Revolutionary steps were taken in rapid succession under Soviet control. The Soviet Civil Authority established a ruling apparatus of ten bureaus in November 1945. The NKPPC, mentioned above, had been established in February 1946. NKPPC elections were held at every level in January 1947, followed by the establishment of the North Korean People's Committees (NKPC). Information on each elected official's background was a significant factor, as demonstrated in the following chart on election results for a people's committee.

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*equality Structure*, 51.

Sub-county People's Committee Members' *Songbun*<sup>19</sup>

<i>Songbun</i> Background	Number of Personnel	Percentage
Peasants	7795	57.97%
Office workers	3901	29%
Laborers	1121	8.33%
Intellectuals	310	2.3%
Merchants	228	1.69%
Industrialists	48	0.35%
Religious persons	40	0.29%
Former landlords	1	0.07%

North Korea conducted its first citizen registration campaign from September through December 1946. The NKPCC replaced the historical Korean family registry system with citizen identification cards and residence registration. The identification card included an individual's name, date and place of birth, current residence, ethnicity (Korean or otherwise), basic physical characteristics, place of work, and details of residence relocation.

This identification card preceded the development of the *songbun* system and therefore did not yet include "songbun" classification. By the late 1940s, however,

19 Kim Il-sung, "Results of People's Committee Elections at Every Level and the Central Mission From Now On," *Kim Il-sung's Collected Works*, Vol.3, 191.

documents concerning *songbun* were required for positions in the party, the government, and labor groups. Whereas individuals with a background of laborer or peasant were given leadership positions, those who were classified as supporters of Japan or of the exploitation class (merchants, landlords) were not given citizen identification cards and were purged when they complained.<sup>20</sup>

Acting on Soviet advice, North Korean leaders then established 18 schools throughout North Korea with 6-24 month programs to train new leaders. Many of the trainers were Soviet-Koreans,<sup>21</sup> because incumbent native administrators were tainted by their association with the Japanese. Trainees were drawn from preferred *songbun* occupations: farmers, laborers, and revolutionaries.<sup>22</sup> Ironically, many of these instructors, the first to carry out *songbun*-type policies, were subsequently purged for being too pro-Soviet after the Soviet Union left Korea in 1948.<sup>23</sup>

20 Hyon In-ae, "North Korean Resident Registration System," 11.

21 Lee Song Ro, *North Korea's Societal Inequality Structure*, 52-53.

22 *Ibid.*, 52.

23 The Republic of Korea had been established on 15 August 1948, but Kim Il-sung and the Soviets would not permit North Koreans to vote in elections under its Constitution. Lee Song Ro, *North Korea's Societal Inequality Structure*, 55.

It could be said that at the time of the founding of the DPRK in 1948, no one was excluded from the political process based on *songbun*, as long as s/he supported the socialist revolution. Some groups, such as Christians, landlords, and merchants, found it very difficult to survive if they did not support social reconstruction efforts or hide their pasts; at this time it was not impossible to hide one's personal history or lineage.

There were, however, *songbun* investigations for those who wanted major party, government, or economic positions. These investigations were divided into two types. Key cadre and those assigned to sensitive projects, particularly those who represented North Korea overseas, were subjected to background investigations extending to their third cousins. Those involved in trade were investigated to their second cousins. Matters for investigation in both cases included ideological background, personal assets, assets confiscated during land reform, associations with reactionary elements, or having relatives in South Korea. Such concerns, however, did not apply at that time to the average citizen.<sup>24</sup>

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24 North Korean defector Hyon In-ae, "Bukhan-ui Jumin Deungnok Jedo-e Gwanhan Yeongu (Study on the North Korean Resident Registration System)" (Master's thesis, Ewha Womans University, 2008), 12. In addition to conducting several interviews for this paper, Ms. Hyon also used her own experiences growing up in North Korea to provide information for her paper.

The classification of all elements of North Korean society began immediately before the outbreak of the Korean War of 1950-53. The war itself contributed significantly to the definition of sharp class distinctions. North Koreans and their families who sacrificed for the fatherland were naturally given prominence over those North Koreans and their families who supported the South or United Nations Command forces, avoided being drafted into the military, fled to South Korea, were South Korean prisoners of war, or were repatriated prisoners of war. The Korean Workers' Party ultimately defined these groups as being antagonistic toward Kim Il-sung and the regime, whether their opposition was real or just perceived.

Another early form of *songbun* discrimination was instituted against those who had assisted local security efforts under the brief occupation by United Nations forces that held North Korea in the fall of 1950. When the United Nations Command (UNC) and South Korean forces advanced into North Korea, local villages, sub-counties, and counties set up public peace units and self-defense units to maintain order. Although most of these units were staffed by farmers, they were nevertheless targeted as enemies by the North Korean regime after North Korean territory was recovered following Chinese intervention in the war.

The farmers and their families involved in UNC peace units were brought before “people’s court trials” (kangaroo courts) from 1951-1952. Most farmers were sentenced and executed while their families were sent to isolated areas in northern North Korea for six to twelve months.<sup>25</sup> In spite of their peasant background, these exiled families would be defined as part of the lower *songbun* classes in future social stratification efforts.

North Korea officially claims that about two million North Koreans left the North during the Korean War to go to South Korea, but the number could have been as high as five million.<sup>26</sup> Most were from the North’s southern provinces of Hwanghae, Kangwon, and the areas around the city of Kaesong, which lost 40% of its population to the South.<sup>27</sup> Family members who remained behind after their kinsmen fled suffered severe discrimination in the North due to their connection with those who had chosen to leave.

The Korean Workers’ Party viewed family members who remained as potential enemies of the North Korean state, due to their familial ties in the South. In what was to become the seminal effort at applying

*songbun* (background) categories, the family members who stayed behind were placed into three categories by the party: (1) those with relatively good backgrounds as laborers and peasant farmers; (2) those related to individuals who did not commit crimes but left the North out of fear of the terror of war; and (3) those related to individuals who left of their own volition. Families of the third group were relocated to isolated mountain areas secluded from population centers, forced into hard labor, and subjected to intensive surveillance for the remainder of their lives.<sup>28</sup>

Under a similar rationale, North Korean prisoners of war repatriated from the South during the Korean War were considered politically tainted and therefore potential enemies of the state. Initially the regime manipulated their image, treating them as heroes, but afterwards about 70 % were suspected of being spies for the South. Once considered war heroes, these individuals underwent severe scrutiny and were often labeled politically unreliable. People who had emerged as leaders of prisoners in the United Nations Command POW camps were, after they returned to North Korea, often charged with political crimes and executed.<sup>29</sup>

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25 Kim Yong-gu, “North Korean Residents’ Songbun,” 70-75.

26 *Ibid.*

27 *Ibid.*

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28 *Ibid.*

29 *Ibid.*

Party-orchestrated social struggle has continued since the early years of the North Korean state, intensifying over the decades as the party initiated several national-level investigations of the entire population or selected groups. These investigations provided the foundations for social stratification that enabled the suppression of any and all groups who may or may not have had any intent to oppose the Kim regime. For two years, Kim Il-sung led wide-ranging purges of North Korea's political leadership beginning in August 1956 when factions from the Soviet Union, China and the southern portion of Korea were eliminated, physically in many cases, from the North Korean political scene. These efforts represented a top-down distinction between "friend or foe," a distinction that became the trademark of *songbun* classification.<sup>30</sup>

From 1957 to 1960, Kim Il-sung transformed the North Korean leadership structure from one of collective leadership to a monolithic dictatorship. At his behest, the party issued the May 30th Resolution that began the socio-political classification "markings"

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30 It is not the intent of this report to explain the political purge policies of the Kim regime beyond what is associated with *songbun*. For an excellent rundown of these leadership purges of 1956-58, see Andrei Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung: The Formation of North Korea 1945-1960* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002); and Lim Un, *The Founding of a Dynasty in North Korea – An Authentic Biography of Kim Il-sung* (Japan: Jiyu-sha Printing, 1982).

of the North Korean populace and promulgated Cabinet Decree No. 149 which ordered the large-scale removal of those deemed politically unreliable—in other words, identifying friend from foe from within the North Korean population.

The Korean Workers' Party Politburo passed a decree in 1957 entitled "On the Transformation of the Struggle with Counter-revolutionary Elements into an All-People All-Party Movement," which established the policy and programs for conducting its first large-scale purges of North Korean society.<sup>31</sup> The May 30th Resolution and the KWP's Intensive Guidance Project provided the basis for *songbun*'s socio-political classification of the entire North Korean population by dividing the entire citizenry into three distinct loyalty groups based on family background: "friendly," "neutral," and "enemy" forces.<sup>32</sup>

Friendly forces consisted of the *Partisan/ Ppalchisan* guerrilla group that fought with Kim Il-sung against the Japanese;

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31 Andrei Lankov, "The Repressive System And The Political Control In North Korea," in *Severnaia Koreia: vchera i segodnia (North Korea: Yesterday and Today)* (Moscow: Vostochnaia literatura, 1995), [http://www.fortunecity.com/meltingpot/champion/65/control\\_lankov.htm](http://www.fortunecity.com/meltingpot/champion/65/control_lankov.htm)

32 Kim Yong-gu, "North Korean Residents' Songbun," 70-75; and Andrei Lankov, "The Repressive System And The Political Control In North Korea," [http://www.fortunecity.com/meltingpot/champion/65/control\\_lankov.htm](http://www.fortunecity.com/meltingpot/champion/65/control_lankov.htm)

other military groups that pledged loyalty, collectively referred to as the “*Baekdusan*” line as well as the families of these group members; those who fought and/or died serving in the military during the Korean war, commonly referred to as the “*Nakdong-gang* line”; revolutionaries and their families; and socialist revolution intelligentsia and their families. Enemies were families that were suspected of opposing Kim Il-sung and his supporters; those who collaborated with the Japanese and their families; family members of those who had escaped to South Korea, including soldiers who did not repatriate after the war; and religious persons, landowners, businessmen, and their families.

## ***Songbun* Served as an Effective Tool for Kim Il-sung to Win Total Political Control**

According to party doctrine, to successfully carry out its complete social policies, North Korea must conduct the tasks of *songbun* and social stratum classification, organize surveillance networks and the party’s organizational guidance, and maximize all of the people’s strength through a pan-society mobilization system.

<sup>33</sup> With that as background, the North Korean political system is dominated by the Kim family’s personality cult. Governance is based on Kim family orders, which stand above the law, including the Constitution, all forms of civil law, or regulations, and even above the more influential Korean Workers’ Party (KWP) Charter. The specific hierarchy of authority in North Korea is the words or personal directives of Kim Jong-il; followed by the Ten Great Principles of Monolithic Ideology, KWP directives—particularly the policy guidance of the KWP Secretariat’s Organization and Guidance Department; the KWP Charter and domestic civil laws; and finally the 2009 North Korean Constitution. This political system was developed by Kim Il-sung who established the position of *Suryeong*

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33 Naver.com Encyclopedia, Bukhan-ui Sahoe Jeongchaek (North Korea’s Social Policy). URL: <http://100.naver.com/100.nhn?docid=718411>.

(supreme leader)<sup>34</sup> as not only leading the party but also defining the interests of the nation-state as well, in accordance with what the *Suryeong* dictates.

The KWP, while maintaining the dominant political role within the North Korean party-state, came to serve the leader in primacy above all other political entities. As in other communist political systems, the state and society serve the party, and civil laws do not bind the party.<sup>35</sup> In service to the *Suryeong*, the KWP manages all aspects of the government and society, and its authority is designed to exceed that of all government statutes, including the national Constitution in

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34 The “*Suryeong*” system of leadership stems from North Korea’s *Juche* political philosophy of self-reliance. The role of the *Suryeong* is to lead the socialist revolution through a correct (*Juche*) philosophical vision. The *Suryeong* leads the party, the party leads the nation-state, and the people serve the interests of the nation-state as determined by the *Suryeong* and the party. The institutionalization of the *Suryeong* is supported by North Korea’s cult of personality as applied to both Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il.

35 The Korean Workers’ Party is the ruling party of North Korea. Four other parties exist in North Korea: the Communist Party, the South Korean Labor Party, the Korean Social Democratic Party and the Chondoist Chongu Party, which serve as front parties for external relations with other nations’ parties but have no other political function or power in North Korea. See notes 263 and 264. Also see Kim Dae-hyon, “NK State Security Department Data on Physical Data of 2,100,000 Pyongyang Residents,” *Weekly Chosun Magazine*, October 24, 2011. URL: <http://weekly.chosun.com/client/news/viw.asp?nNewsNumb=002177100002&ctcd=C01>. accessed 24 Oct 11.

all five versions—1948, 1972, 1992, 1998, and 2009. The highest priorities of North Korea’s dictatorship are the security of the leader and regime.

The role of *songbun* in identifying perceived enemies of the state, as well as rooting out those who may be expected to develop into an enemy because of their birth and family background, is the starting point for the regime’s security policies. Stratification of society based on *songbun* gives party, administration, and security agencies authority to determine who is employed where, who lives where, who is medically treated where and how, and who is fed by the state.

The current operative governing policy is governed by the “*songun jeongchi*,” or “military-first policy” promulgated by Kim Jong-il, a form of martial law in effect since 1998 that emphasizes military ideology, its political role, and gives priority to resources for the military and the security agencies. The function of the military and the security agencies is to maintain the safety and security of the regime. All regime policies, practices, and institutions serve to ensure that security. When there is a conflict with norms of international human rights conventions, regime security policies, of course, take precedence. In other words, they take precedence at all times.

The Supreme Leader, or *Suryeong* is directly responsible for all aspects of *songbun* policy and its implementation; he wears all the principal "hats" in the North Korean political structure. As the KWP General Secretary, Kim Jong-il controlled all party policies, priorities, procedures, and personnel, including party secretaries. Kim Jong-un is likely to play a similar role. Local party secretaries implement *songbun*-related actions in their jurisdiction including investigations and *songbun*-related resource allocations such as jobs, housing, and medical treatment. The *Suryeong* provides instructions (or "guidance") to the North Korean legal system in determining court judgments. As the Chairman of the National Defense Commission, Kim Jong-il controlled the Ministry of Public Security (MPS)<sup>36</sup> which conducts periodic *songbun* investigations of every North Korean citizen and the State Security Department (SSD) which applies *songbun* as a factor in political crimes. As the Supreme Commander of the Korean People's Army (KPA), Kim Jong-il controlled the system that assigns *songbun* categories within the military.

The *songbun* system is implemented by a very effective security network of the national police, the state's secret police,

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36 The DPS (*inminpoanbu*) was formerly the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) (*inminpoanseong*) until it was redesignated in 2010. The MPS was formerly the Social Safety Department and before that the Ministry of Interior.

and the military's security apparatus, all of which report to the *Suryeong*. Four specific agencies are involved in conducting *songbun*-related investigations for the Kim regime: the Prosecutor's Office, the MPS, the SSD, and the KPA Military Security Department.<sup>37</sup> It is worth noting how extensive the reach of these internal security arms is: *on the following page*.

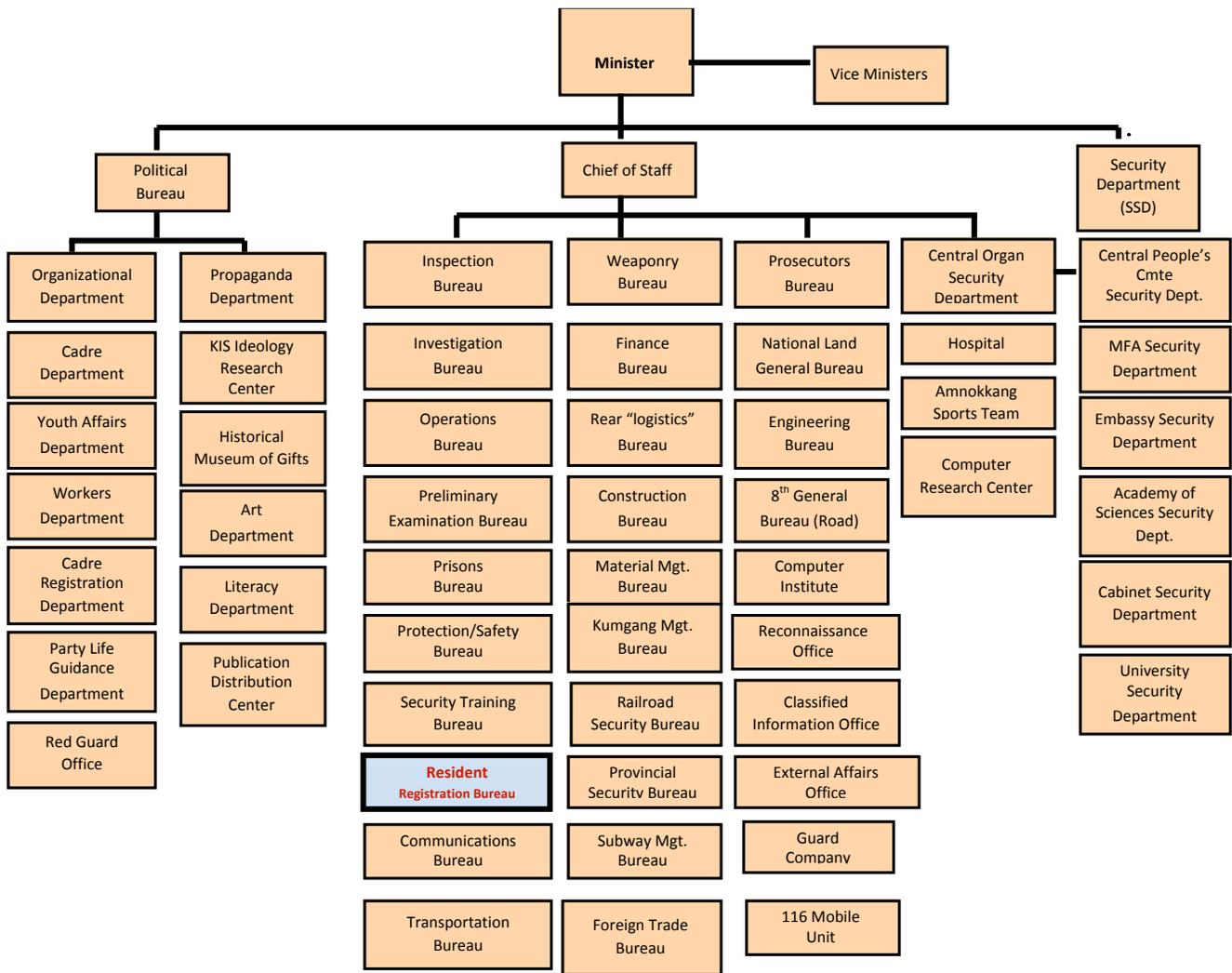
The MPS is North Korea's national police and it maintains a force of 310,000 personnel<sup>38</sup> responsible for normal police functions as well as social control (see organizational chart above).<sup>39</sup> Subordinate to the MPS headquarters are regional police headquarters in nine provinces, the three special cities of Pyongyang, Kaesong and Nampo, 26 lesser cities, 147 counties, 38 special areas, 2 city wards, 149 townships, 3,311 villages, 896 city precincts, and 251

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37 For an in-depth discussion on internal security in North Korea, see forthcoming report by Ken Gause, "Police State: North Korea's System of Control, Surveillance, and Punishment," Committee for Human Rights in North Korea.

38 Chun Hyon-jun, *Bukhan-ui Sahoe Tongje Gigu Gochal: Inmin Boan-seong-eul Jungshim-euro (Examination of North Korea's Social Control Structure: Focus on the Ministry of Public Security)*, (Seoul: Korean Institute for National Unification, Research Project 03-14, 2003), 41.

39 Unpublished manuscript, Ken Gause, "Coercion, Control, Surveillance, and Punishment: A Guide to North Korea's Internal Security Agencies," Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (fill in data upon publication).



special labor zones.<sup>40</sup> The lowest levels of the local MPS stations maintain one or two officers to conduct the Resident Registration Project (RRP). The RRP is the project that conducts all *songbun* investigations and it is at the lower levels that the police

interact with the population and conduct their individual *songbun*-related investigations within the RRP. There is a Resident Registration office or officer at every level of the MPS that coordinates the RRP and conducts the *songbun*-related investigations. These investigations are conducted every two years at minimum for every

40 Chun Hyon-jun, *North Korea's Societal Control Structure*, 39.

**Refugee Testimony on Songbun in the North  
Korean Gulag**

***Lee Young-guk, who spent four years in the political gulags at the Daesuk-ri Camp No.8, has stated that punishment and detention periods were different based on one's songbun. This was also applied to decisions of camp officials or higher authorities on whether to release a political prisoner.***

Source: Data Base Center For North Korean Human Rights. 2008. *White Paper on North Korean Human Rights 2008*. Seoul. North Korean Human Rights Archives, 116.

single North Korean citizen except the leader of the Kim regime.<sup>41</sup> Also, once a crime is committed by a known suspect, the first action by the police and prosecutors is to check the RRP/songbun file for background information to start the relevant investigation.

The State Security Department (SSD) is the premier counterintelligence force within North Korea and its internal security functions are synonymous with the concept of "secret police." It conducts a number of tasks associated with counterintelligence and overseas collection operations. Furthermore, the SSD runs a series of political prison camps whose current total population is estimated at 150,000-

41 *Ibid.*, 27-41.

200,000.<sup>42</sup> Even though it is a national agency, the SSD maintains offices extending to and preempting local levels when necessary. It also deploys personnel to large economic, social and political organizations. It is manned by 50,000 to 70,000 personnel and also depends on additional sources. The SSD was separated from the national police in 1973 to focus on the physical and political security of the regime and its leadership. The SSD runs its day-to-day operations under a vice-director implying that the real head of the office is the regime's leader himself.

Each level of the SSD makes copies of a person's songbun file to use in preventive counterintelligence supporting regime security.

The KPA Military Security Command (MSC) parallels the functions of the SSD, but holds jurisdiction within the military. It has sometimes been known to carry out its operations within the civilian sector, under direct orders from Kim Jong-il. The KPA MSC is responsible for songbun-related actions and investigations within the KPA for all military personnel. It coordinates songbun-related actions with the MPS and the SSD as required.<sup>43</sup> These functions are

42 See David Hawk, *Hidden Gulag Second Edition: The Lives and Voices of "Those Who Are Sent to the Mountains,"* (Washington, DC: Committee For Human Rights in North Korea, 2012), 27.

43 Choi Chu-hwal, "Bukhan Inmingun Bowisa-

carried out by the Registration Section of the MSC's Cadre Department. The MSC maintains field officers extending to the battalion level who perform *songbun*-related functions and send the data to their respective Registration Sections.

## **The Connection Between *Songbun* Investigations and Political Purges**

The Kim regime has succeeded in remaining in power due to its brutally successful political purges, pervasive surveillance programs by multiple security agencies, and a legal/ penal system that determines judgments based on *songbun*. The regime has conducted a series of background investigations over the decades to determine its citizens' political reliability, first targeting specific individuals and groups, and later labeling the entire population. After liberation, investigations began in limited stages but expanded in the 1960s. In the following decades, with the leader's changing perceptions of 'threats,' additional or follow-up investigations were undertaken. The result was the classification of each citizen into pre-determined strata that consigned individuals to political-economic roles that would support the party and the state in political and economic management. Although the stated objective of these investigations was to determine an individual's background, the process itself served to inspire fear, coerce compliance, and ensure acquiescence.

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ryeongbu-ui Chegye mit Hwaldong (Structure and Activities of North Korea's Military Security Command of the Korean People's Army)," in *Bukhan Josa Yeongu (North Korean Research Studies)* 1 (1997), Bukhan Munjae Josa Yeonguso (North Korea Research Institute), 48-61.

Once Kim Il-sung completed his political purges in 1958, the KWP initiated the first major *songbun*-based investigation through the Party Intensive Guidance

Project. Carried out at the provincial level, this project was intended to identify and eliminate counter-revolutionaries and hostile elements from any position of influence. In Pyongyang it was designed to be conducted from December 1958 to the end of May 1959, but it took seven months longer. The delays actually enabled some opposition to Kim Il-sung to arise in the provinces, but that was immediately suppressed.<sup>44</sup>

The KWP carried out the project in South Hwanghae Province from December 1958 to June 1959; in Kaesong City from May to October of 1959; and in Kangwon Province from October 1959 to the end of 1960. These areas were given priority because of their proximity to the Demilitarized Zone between North and South Korea, the regime's concern over possible defections, and its distrust of personnel working in those areas. While central party personnel managed those areas, the central party permitted local authorities in other areas to implement the guidance.

In 1958, the KWP organized the Central Guidance Office in the Central Party comprised of the Director and Vice-Director of the KWP Administration Department; the Director, Vice-Director, and three section chiefs of the very powerful

*Investigators used two methodologies to classify the local populace. The first method was called the “public struggle” in which the populace was told that if they would confess their disloyal inclinations toward Kim Il-sung and the socialist government, they would receive lenient treatment. If they refused to confess, they would receive harsh punishment. There were 20 public cases in each ward of Pyongyang City, 20 cases in Kaesong, and 10 in every other county. The second method was a public trial. The judges for these trials would be a small group of 5-6 personnel who would grill a suspected discontent day and night in isolation, without food or use of a toilet, until they confessed. Every province conducted five trials.*

Organization and Guidance Department; the Chief of Police in the Ministry of Interior; and the Prosecutor-General. Under this office, the party formed a massive substructure which employed 7,000 personnel comprised of party section chiefs and guidance officers, Party committee chairmen of government

44 Lee Song Ro, *North Korea's Societal Inequality Structure*, 71.

agencies and party committee vice-chairmen of each province, as well as some Kim Il-sung University graduates.<sup>45</sup>

These 7,000 personnel—investigators—were expected to learn the principles, methods, and points of the “Party Intensive Guidance” during a two-week instruction. However, since they could not accommodate the 7,000 investigators within one building, they separated them into three groups. The first group was trained in the theatre of the Department of Transportation in front of the Pyongyang Train Station; the second group in the Pyongyang City Party Conference Room; and the third group in the KWP Central Party Conference Hall. Instructors were officers of the Party Intensive Guidance Department, and the content of the training was the categorization of the entire North Korean populace into three classes. Once trained, these personnel were dispatched to the provincial level where the provincial party provided situation briefings. From there, investigators were dispatched to the local county, village, city sub-ward, and factory/enterprise levels.

The specific organizations that carried out the Party Intensive Guidance were called “security committees,” established at the

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45 *Ibid.* Also see Andrei Lankov, “The Repressive System And The Political Control In North Korea,” [http://www.fortunecity.com/meltingpot/champion/65/control\\_lankov.htm](http://www.fortunecity.com/meltingpot/champion/65/control_lankov.htm)

Pyongyang, provincial, county, village, and factory/enterprise level, including the military. These security committees were political in nature but also dealt with ordinary crimes. Security committees at the provincial level were authorized to carry out executions. There were also “confirmation organizations” whose duties were to confirm identities and investigative results. The activities of these “confirmation organizations” caused a general atmosphere of fear throughout North Korea.<sup>46</sup>

Through the methods of the May 30th Resolution and the KWP’s Intensive Guidance Project, one third of all North Koreans, or roughly 3,200,000 people were found to be of the hostile class. 6,000 of these individuals were given prison sentences and 70,000 were banished to isolated inhospitable areas in northern North Korea based on Cabinet Decree No. 149.<sup>47</sup>

The North Korean Cabinet Decree No. 149 paralleled the efforts under the May 30th Resolution. Under Cabinet Decree No. 149, those judged to be impure elements by *songbun* standards were forcibly removed from areas within 20km from the coast or the Demilitarized Zone between North and South Korea, from areas within 50 km of Pyongyang or Kaesong, and from areas

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46 Lee Song Ro, *North Korea's Societal Inequality Structure*, 72.

47 *Ibid.*, 72-3

within 20 km from other large cities. Cabinet Decree No. 149 ensured the “red city plan” succeeded in excluding counter-revolutionaries from Pyongyang City and the military.<sup>48</sup> Approximately 5,000 families were removed from Pyongyang, 600 families from Kaesong, 1,500 families from Hwanghae South Province, and 1,000 families from Kangwon Province. These families were resettled in North Korea’s Siberia—the isolated mountainous areas of northern North Korea.<sup>49</sup>

The isolated resettlements became the forerunners of today’s political prison camps. For the victims of Cabinet Decree No. 149, these semi-prisons, or special districts, were not as severe as today’s prison camps but far worse than what is commonly thought of as an exile settlement. The North Korean authorities were purging people in large numbers, so

the Kim regime needed large areas to confine them.<sup>50</sup>

The 5th plenary session of the 4th Party Congress, held in December 1962, adopted four objectives called the “four military

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48 *Ibid.*, 310

49 Kim Yong-gu, “North Korean Residents’ *Songbun*,” 70-75.

50 Andrei Lankov, “The Repressive System And The Political Control In North Korea,” [http://www.fortunecity.com/meltingpot/champion/65/control\\_lankov.htm](http://www.fortunecity.com/meltingpot/champion/65/control_lankov.htm)

lines.”<sup>51</sup> These were: arming the entire population, fortifying the entire country, converting the members of the armed forces into politically reliable cadre, and modernizing the army. North Korea set out to further isolate anti-revolutionary elements and clearly separate them from those who carried a weapon and trained to defend the country.

In February 1964, the 8th Session of the 4th Party Congress approved an investigation of all North Korean citizens through the citizen registration project. The Party Congress produced a Manual referred to as the “General Outline (Gaeyo)” that provided directives for investigating each individual, reaching out as far as three generations, to second cousins, to a spouse’s uncles and aunts, and to similar levels for the mother’s side of the family.<sup>52</sup> Investigations were to focus on education, work before and after liberation, background, assets, life style, and activities during the Korean War. Three copies of investigative reports were made – one copy to the higher party office, one to the higher police, and one to the local police. This investiga-

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51 The four military lines are arming the entire population, fortifying the entire country, converting the members of the armed forces into politically reliable cadre, and modernizing the army. See Kongdan Oh and Ralph Hassig, *North Korea: Through the Looking Glass* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2000), 108.

52 Kim Hak-jun, et al, *Life in South and North Korea* (Seoul: Pak Young Publishers, 1989); p.45.

tive process produced five metric tons of paperwork per day.<sup>53</sup>

In support of this decision, the KWP promulgated a guidance document called "Overview of Work at Every Level, Every Class and Every Mass Group." With this document, the party established new measures that combined all experiences to date for the purpose of carrying out class policy with consistency in reclassifying North Korean citizens according to *songbun*.<sup>54</sup> After a three-year period of examination that began in 1967, then-president Kim Il-sung reported to the Fifth 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."<sup>55</sup>

Over the following decades, the North Korean regime initiated several more *songbun* family background investigation projects (see Appendix A). Each built on the previous work to further identify political friends or foes and ostensibly strength-

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53 Institute of North Korea Studies, *North Korea's Class Policy; 1977*; Chapter Six.

54 Kim Yong-gu, "North Korean Residents' Songbun," 70-75.

55 Kongdan Oh, "Political Classification and Social Structure in North Korea," Brookings Institution, June 5 2003, [http://www.brookings.edu/testimony/2003/0605northkorea\\_oh.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/testimony/2003/0605northkorea_oh.aspx).

en the security of the regime. But they also served the party's economic policies. Lower *songbun* categories were forced to accept heavy-labor and menial positions whereas the higher *songbun* categories were given cadre positions.

Three *songbun* investigations provided the basis for all investigations in detail, objectives, and scope: the KWP Intensive Guidance Project of 1958 to 1960 which was designed to relocate "impure elements" within society to isolated areas; the Resident Registration Project of 1966 to 1967 that classified all North Korean citizens as friend or foe of the regime; and the Classification Project for Division of Populace into 3 Classes and 51 Categories of 1967 to 1970 that placed every North Korean citizen into one of 51 *songbun* categories and enabled the Kim regime to prioritize the provision of all social welfare, occupations, housing and food programs to specific groups and/or locations. Later investigations were designed to refine or update investigative data, expand *songbun* categories, or modernize the *songbun* data system.

The Resident Registration Project remains in effect today. It is similar to other countries' citizen registration systems, except that its additional purpose is to assign each North Korean to a pre-set category that reflects the regime's perspective whether individu-

als are a political asset or liability.<sup>56</sup>

On 7 February 1971, the KWP Secretariat issued an order to Party Secretaries at each level of the KWP to review a document entitled "Peoples' Classification Index" which explained the original 51 categories of *songbun*.<sup>57</sup> Appendix B identifies the initial 51 *songbun* categories.

Once the 51 categories were established, 3,915,000 million people from 870,000 families were classified as the core class, 3,150,000 million people from 700,000 families were classified as the wavering class, and 7,935,000 million people from 1,730,000 families were classified as the hostile class.<sup>58</sup> It's interesting to note that at that time most North Koreans were regarded as the regime's enemy. In an updated North Korean census of 2008, the North's population is 23,349,859. Translating this population total into the often quoted class percentages of 28% for the core class, 45% for the wavering class and 27% for the hostile class, the data shows that highest level of the core class at 1% would be 233,498 citizens and the remaining 27% of the core class would stand at 6,304,461.

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56 Lee Song Ro, *North Korea's Societal Inequality Structure*, 320-326.

57 Republic of Korea Moral Culture Board, *North Korea's True Situation* (Seoul: Koryowon, 1986), 111.

58 Kim Yong-gi, "Class Inequality Structure and Class Policy," 206.

The wavering class' 45% would account for 10,507,436 citizens and the hostile class' 27% would be 6,304,461 citizens.<sup>59</sup> A leading expert on North Korea has insisted that it is useless to try and come up with exact numbers of families and individuals in each *songbun* class.<sup>60</sup> However, in terms of percentages, longtime Korean expert Dr. Kongdan Oh has pointed out that the hostile group has increased from 25% to 40%. She noted that it is uncommon for those in the lower classes to rise to higher social classes but common for those in higher classes to fall to the hostile class. She also was quoted as stating that, in her estimation, the regime's number of core cadre stands at 20,000,<sup>61</sup> many fewer than other estimates suggest.

*Songbun* classifications continue to be modified sometimes to respond to developments outside the country. For example, thirteen new *songbun* categories were

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59 Kim Su-am, et al, *Bukhan Juminui Salmui Jil: Siltae Wa Insik* (Quality of North Korean Residents Lives: Situation and Understanding) Ministry of Unification (Seoul: Research Series 11-06, December 2011), p.213.

60 Andrei Lankov, "The Repressive System And The Political Control In North Korea," [http://www.fortunecity.com/meltingpot/champion/65/control\\_lankov.htm](http://www.fortunecity.com/meltingpot/champion/65/control_lankov.htm)

61 Yang Jong-ah, "Puk Choktae Kye-chung 15% Chungga, Haeksim Kanbu 2 Man Myong" (North Korea's Hostile Class Increases by 15%, Core Cadre at 20,000)," Daily NK, 31 May 2007. <http://www.dailynk.com/korean/read.php?catald=nk00100&num=41875>

introduced in 1980 to reclassify all ethnic Koreans who returned to North Korea, including those from Japan, South Korea, China, and other countries.<sup>62</sup> In the mid-1990s, North Korea's famine changed domestic economic parameters enough to cause the North Korean authorities to change the *songbun* classification categories to a 45-category framework.<sup>63</sup>

North Korea's Ministry of Public Security (MPS) began using a computer program "Chungbok 2.0," to digitize all documentation regarding resident registration in December 2003. It is not surprising that the security police labeled the computer data management system designed to make human rights violations more systematic, "Faithful Servant 2.0." The use of this program makes it easier for the authorities to reach any citizen's *songbun* file from any MPS computer terminal at the provincial, city, city ward, or county levels.

Within this data base system, the MPS can easily arrange objective data for surveys of *songbun* categories, but it is more difficult to arrange the subjective data written in the *songbun* file comments section.<sup>64</sup> The previously mentioned roundup of relatives

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62 Lee Song Ro, *North Korea's Societal Inequality Structure*, 39, note 37.

63 Republic of Korea Ministry of Unification, "North Korea 2009," 331.

64 See *songbun* record figure on p. 40-41.

of those who defected to South Korea is circumstantial evidence of that. Future refinements of the program are likely, so that, for example, "Chungbok 3.0" might make social control and *songbun*-based human rights violations even easier.

There is a very recent example of this. South Korea's *Weekly Chosun Magazine* recently published an article reviewing a North Korean data base file leaked from South Korean intelligence to the magazine. The Microsoft file (most likely an Excel spreadsheet) was produced by the North Korean State Security Department and it appears to be a data base file incorporating the aforementioned information. All of the information is standard background information on each individual in Pyongyang. The article does not mention the concept of *songbun*, but this may be due to the magazine article author's lack of awareness of this concept (most South Koreans have no idea what North Korea's *songbun* is), but the author does an excellent job of describing the objective data displayed in this file. The information covers each person's name age, place of birth, place of residence, place of employment and position, spouse's name, and political party affiliation. This file is apparently an effort by the State Security Department to coalesce data collected by the Ministry of Public Security (the agency for conducting the initial investigations) to provide a

profile of Pyongyang residents, which the file shows for 2,108,032 persons, excluding the highest *songbun* (*Partisan/Ppalchisan* line of about 10,000), children under 17 (data is not collected on residents until the age of 17—see next section), or soldiers serving in Pyongyang.<sup>65</sup>

As early as 2005, provinces were employing Pentium 4 computers, and counties were using Pentium 3 computers. North Korean defectors insist that this program enables the MPS to track political activities of each individual citizen.<sup>66</sup>

Record storage for all MPS documents, including *songbun* documents as well as many party and government documents, is at the MPS Underground Document Storage Facility in Manpo City, Chagang Province. Should the Kim regime collapse at some point, and Korean unification take place, these documents should be preserved to provide potential legal recourse for those disadvantaged by the system.

#### More *songbun* reclassifications in the future

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65 Kim Dae-hyon, "NK State Security Department Data on Physical Data of 2,100,000 Pyongyang Residents," *Weekly Chosun Magazine*, October 24, 2011. URL: <http://weekly.chosun.com/client/news/viw.asp?nNewsNumb=002177100002&ctcd=C01>. accessed 24 Oct 11.

66 "Bukdangguk Jeon Jumin Sinbun Deungrok Jeonsanhwa (North Korean Authorities Computerizes All Resident Identification Registrations)," *Yonhap News*, August 24, 2005.

are likely as Kim Jong-il's heir, Kim Jong-un, attempts to consolidate his power and define his own "class enemies," "counter-revolutionaries," and "impure elements." Purges must be anticipated to accompany these new efforts to define loyalties as the *Suryeong* wishes them to be defined. To that effect, the latest *songbun* investigation was conducted during September 2009 to May 2010 in preparation for the 3rd Party Delegates Conference in September 2010 where Kim Jong-un was announced as the Kim regime's leadership successor. The purpose was to ensure there were no members of the party who were Christians or bourgeois owners of property. Also targeted were family members of recent defectors. The focus period was from the famine of the mid-to-late 1990's forward.<sup>67</sup>

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67 See "Buk, Kim Jong-un Sidae Daebihan 'Chulsin todae Josa Sa-eop' Wanryo (North Korea Completes Background Investigations In Preparation for the Kim Jong-un Era)," *Open Radio For North Korea*, July 9, 2010. URL: [http://khhong.com/article/view.php?id=khinc\\_News&no=7885](http://khhong.com/article/view.php?id=khinc_News&no=7885); Lee Jun-un, "Kim Jong-un Nae-nyeon Hugyeoja-ro Gongsik Deungjang Yejeong (Kim Jong-un To Be Introduced Officially Next Year As Successor)," June 8, 2009. URL: <http://blog.daum.net/liguangzheng/33>; and Buk, Kim Jong-un Sidae Daebihan 'Chulsin todae Josa Sa-eop' Wanryo' (North Korea Completes Background Investigations In Preparation for the Kim Jong-un Era), *North Korea Strategic Information Service Center*, July 8, 2010. URL: <http://citrain64.blog.me/100108701355>.

## IV. NORTH KOREA'S MANUAL TELLS HOW TO CONDUCT *SONGBUN* INVESTIGATIONS

As mentioned in the introduction, in 1993 North Korea's Ministry of Public Safety published a document entitled, "Resident Registration Project Reference Manual" (RRPRM, hereafter referred to as the 'Manual'.)<sup>68</sup> The Manual was issued as a set of instructions for MPS resident registration investigators to use during the conduct of their *songbun* investigations. The Manual specifically states that the purpose of the Resident Registration Project investigations is the "protection of Kim Jong-il" (under the new leadership presumably the protection of Kim Jong-un) and that the investigations must "intensify class struggle," and must "sort out the hostile class without exception." The Manual states that "a person's *songbun* is based on the economic conditions at the time of one's birth and influenced by one's family class foundation (*todae*, or the occupation and social status of one's parents prior to liberation). *Songbun* is also influenced by one's social-political life activities, as well as the historical development of our

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68 Kim Sang-son and Ri Song-hi (edited by Ri Pang-sun), "Resident Registration Project Reference Manual," Social Safety Department Publishing House, 1993. Social Safety Department (Sahoe Anjeonbu) is the former designation of North Korea's Ministry of Public Safety.

country's history and class relations. *Songbun*'s specific regulation must be based in the party's historical study of class policy during all periods of the revolution." The Manual also states that "*songbun* and social stratum regulations must conform to the party's class and mass doctrine, and in doing so, must isolate hostile elements and serve the majority of the people."<sup>69</sup>

According to the Manual, the guiding principles of the Resident Registration Program are:

- Investigations must guarantee the personal security and the long life of the Kim Family;
- Everybody must be investigated, no exceptions;
- Investigations should cover in detail one's past and present;
- Must guarantee the objectivity and scientific base of the investigation;
- Must investigate every person based on the principles of the party;
- Investigations must be in line with the party's class doctrine and mass doctrine.<sup>70</sup>

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69 *Ibid.*, p. 8-9, and 118-119.

70 *Ibid.*, p.201.

Of particular note, each section of the Manual begins with the personal instructions of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il on the importance of conducting the work associated with the Resident Registration Project. The Manual is very revealing in its content, demonstrating beyond refutation the institutionalization of the *songbun* system.

The Manual explains resident investigation rules and procedures, methodology, resident files preparation, filing, storage and use, *songbun* classification guidelines (including procedures and standards), organization and guidance of residents' registration work, detailed description of responsible officers' mission and resident registration, and expectations of North Korean residents.<sup>71</sup>

According to the Manual, all residents of North Korea must be investigated, regardless of status. Investigations are based on one's entire household and start with the head of the household. The North Korean Resident Registration System requires a citizen to register his or her personal identification information and residence for acquiring an identification card or changing one. Such required information includes birthplace, occupation, marital status, adoption, and deaths.

Figure [1] DPRK citizen identification card, 2004 version (L) and before 2004 (R).<sup>72</sup>



71 Hyon In-ae, "North Korean Resident Registration System," 4.

72 Lee Beom Ki, "ID Cards Set for Regular Changeover," Daily NK, August 3, 2011. URL: <http://www.dailynk.com/english/read.php?catald=nk01500&num=8023>. The picture on the left is of the cover of the DPRK Citizen Registration Card (identification card) issued by the Ministry of Public Security (national police) and the picture on the right is the cover of the DPRK Citizen Registration Card issued by the Social Safety Department (former name of the MPS/national police) prior to 2004.

From birth until maturity, an individual is carried on his or her father's registry, or mother's if the father is deceased. At age 17 he or she must turn in a personal profile form that includes name, gender, *chul-sin songbun* (family background), birth-place, residence, blood type, information on parents and siblings, and finger and palm prints in order to receive a citizen identification card. This process begins near the end of one's last school year when students turn in a type of resume to their teachers. If there is a change in any of this information at any point in one's life, the person has 15 days to report it to the police or penalties are imposed. Every change of one's work place must be reported, as must changes in marital status, births, or deaths reported by one's family.<sup>73</sup> Once a person's file is made, it is supplemented with one's birth registration certificate, all documents related to citizen registration, military discharge papers, prison release documents, and organizational membership and entrance documents. It also can include documents related to entering and exiting the country, as well as specialized documents concerning repatriated prisoners of war and those who came to the North from the South. The police at the city and county level are generally responsible for all records in their jurisdiction. Local policemen work

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73 Hyon In-ae, "North Korean Resident Registration System."

with housing unit (*inminban*<sup>74</sup>) supervisors to update records of new persons in the local housing units (see North Korea's MPS Resident Registration Organizations Chart below<sup>75</sup>). Those reports would include new births, releases from the military or prisons, relocations or marriages into a housing unit, and deaths.<sup>76</sup> Special circumstances require special handling. RRP and *songbun* information concerning personnel of key agencies is considered secret.

The Resident Registration Offices of specialized organizations carry out resident registration for their specific organizations, such as the SSD, the 91st Training Center,<sup>77</sup> the Ministry of People's Armed Forces, and all prison camp personnel under the MPS and the SSD. The KWP Central Committee United Front Committee and its subordinate intelligence units maintain their own

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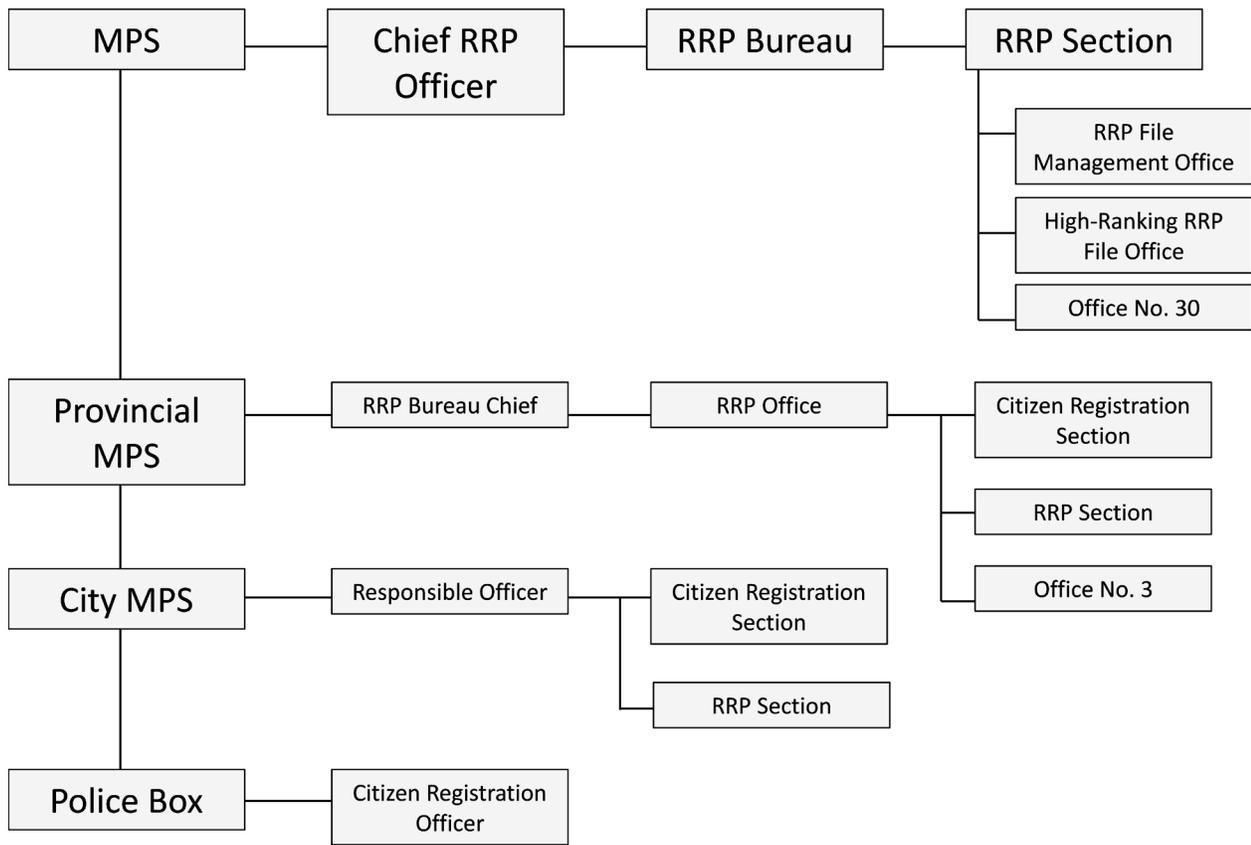
74 Inminban, or "people's housing group," is a system of local population control supervised by the MPS and used by the SSD for detecting aberrant criminal, social or political behavior. Each Inminban has a supervisor employed by the government to monitor local housing units of 15-40 family housing units. The supervisor monitors this behavior and submits regular reports on all families to the MPS and/or SSD.

75 Hyon In-ae, "North Korean Resident Registration System," 19.

76 Kim Sang-son and Ri Song-hee, *Resident Registration Project Reference Manual*, (Pyongyang: Ministry of Public Safety Publishing Company, 1993), 11 & 25.

77 The 91st Training Center is also known as the Pyongyang Defense Command. Its mission is the defense of Pyongyang.

## North Korea's MPS Resident Registration Organization



resident registration officers. Office No. 3 of the Provincial-level MPS does investigations of all personnel associated with the Guards Command which provides direct security and material products for the supreme leader and the Kim family.<sup>78</sup>

The Manual states that one's socio-political life within the context of the socialist revolution is connected to one's background. As previously noted, *songbun* has two components and both must be investigated thoroughly. It is also critical

to investigate and record all information relating to religion and other political parties. In addition to world society's more popular religions, this information also includes activities related to cosmology, geomancy, animism, shaman practices, physiognomy, and superstition. Information regarding awards or punishments is also included. The *songbun* of each relative and extended family is taken into consideration as is information on relatives living in China. Investigations include interviews with personnel in related organizations, local housing unit chiefs, and, if warranted,

<sup>78</sup> Kim and Ri, *Project Reference Manual*, 16.

interviews with the individual being investigated. All police branches and offices cooperate in this effort.<sup>79</sup>

Once an investigation is completed, two files are made for the subject—one dealing with the individual and the other dealing with the household. Each file is identified with a control number that includes a local area identification number such as 12398 for the city of Anju, 8293 for Chongju, 21981 for the Kumgang area, or 3298 for organizations such as the general military and 2892 for the SSD, or for prison camps such as 2391 for political prison camp No. 18 (the only political prison camp run by the MPS, not the SSD). Additionally, each person is assigned a personal number that is on one's birth certificate and continues onto one's citizen identity card.<sup>80</sup>

Therefore, all North Koreans have a *songbun* number. It is the combination of the regional or organizational number and their own personal number given to them when they were born.

All resident registration files for individuals involved in protecting Kim Jong-il are color-coded red, regardless of whether they work in farms or enterprises that produce products for the ruling family or actually serve as bodyguards to protect it.

79 *Ibid.*, 24-25.

80 *Ibid.*, 44.

Changes to one's file occur frequently. Examples of ordinary changes include births, communication with relatives outside North Korea, changes in residence or workplace, overseas travel, or time in prison.<sup>81</sup> As mentioned above, an investigator must contact one's local party committee, workplace, housing unit supervisor, other police offices, the SSD, the prosecutor's office, the Social-Legal Life Guidance Committee, and local military mobilization office to collect data to update the investigation so the process is both extensive and exhaustive.

Every file is stored at the city or county level police headquarters in the Resident File Storage Office or the Resident Registration Data Office.

When establishing a person's *songbun* classification, the city or county police chief, the local Resident Registration Officer and related MPS section chiefs and deputy section chiefs meet together to make a collective recommendation to the local party secretary. All related materials are provided to applicable party organizations for this decision.<sup>82</sup> The local party secretary has the last word,

81 *Ibid.*, 49-50. For residence changes, a North Korean's file must be submitted within three days.

82 Resident Registration Project Reference Manual," Social Safety Department Publishing House, 1993, p.121. Also see Hyon In-ae, "North Korean Resident Registration System."

normally following the recommendation of the *songbun* investigating officer. All *songbun* classifications activity must be in compliance with two guidance documents provided by the local party committee: the Task Guide Manual on Each Class and Social Stratum of the Masses; and the *Songbun* Classification Guide.<sup>83</sup>

It is not unusual, but very dangerous, for one to try to bribe *songbun* investigators to alter *songbun* papers. This is not possible at higher cadre positions, because the investigations are so thorough.<sup>84</sup> Since the SSD also has a copy of all files, bribery to change one's *songbun* record can backfire during subsequent investigations unless the local SSD officer is also bribed. If Kim Jong-il was fond of someone and appointed him/her despite shortcomings in his/her background, the State Security Department intensifies its surveillance of that person.<sup>85</sup>

Figure 2 is an example of an individual's file that is included in the Resident Registration Project Reference Manual. Interestingly, the example shown is that of a person with solid *songbun* at the time of liberation, e.g.,

a member of a farmer family at that time. We can see that in the example provided, all of the interviewees are KWP members and that there is no derogatory information on the file subject.

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83 The Manual states that these two documents exist but the author could not obtain copies of these two North Korean documents.

84 Im Yong-sun, "Principles of Cadre Appointments," 108-110.

85 *Ibid.*

Figure 2: North Korean Resident Registration File<sup>86</sup>

North Korean Resident Registration File									
Page 1									
Individual #: Onchon 2194					Resident File #: Taedong 28641				
Name	Ri Chung-song	Other name	M/F	Birth date	1941.9.18	Race	Chosun (Korean)		
Place of Birth		Pyongan South Province, Taedong County, Wau-ri		Party Entrance Date		1963.4.6			
Chulsin Song-bun	Peasant	Social Songbun	Soldier	Class: Discharged Soldier	Connection with Foreign Country	China			
Handicaps and Physical Characteristics: (blank)									
Family and Relatives									
Relation	Name	Birth date	Number	Re-mark	Relation	Name	Birth date	Number	Re-mark
Father	Ri Tae-won	1924.2.9	Onchon 2192 2		Younger Brother	Ri Un-shil	1947.12.9	Onchon 2198	
Mother	Ri Mae-nyo	1926.11.28	Onchon 2193		Father's Cousin	Ri Tae-hyok	1928.3.9	Pyongsong 12	China
Wife	Pak Chun-ae	1943.2.11	Onchon 2195		Father's Cousin	Ri Tae-yop	1926.12.9	Sunchon 291	
Son	Ri Chung-il	1960.9.18	Onchon 2196						
2nd son	Ri Chung-hyok	1967.8.9	Taedong 12811						
Younger brother	Ri Un-hyok	1943.2.9	Onchon 2197						

86 Kim and Ri, *Project Reference Manual*, 36-37

Page 3								
Party Election Data				Awards				
From	To	Elected Service	Date	Citation	Medal	Date	Citation	Award
1982.10. 2	1986.8. 7	Candidate Member of Taedong County Party Committee	1961.4. 5	Combat Hero	Military Hero (3)			
			1972.4. 2	Work Hero	National Flag Level 3 (2)			
			1982.2. 6	Work Hero	National Flag Level 2			
Diploma and Honors				Criminal Sanctions				
Date	Diploma / Honors	Changes	From	To	Crime	Prison Location		
(Blank)								
(Blank)								
Citizen Card Issue			<h1>Picture</h1>			Marital Status		
Date	Number	Reason				Date	Spouse Name	Changes

Class Foundation and Socio-political Life Record

Ri Chung-song was born oldest son of Ri Tae-won who was a tenant farmer of 2,000 pyong dry fields [1 pyong = 3.3 sq. meters], 1,000 pyong rice field; after liberation, father was allocated 2,000 pyong of rice fields and 1,000 pyong of dry fields to farm. No problems during Korean War, in August 1955 father became part of cooperative farm. Attended elementary and middle school.

Interviewees include: Pyongan South Province, Taedong County Wau-ri Cooperative Farm

- Kim Hyong-su, 52, male, KWP member
- O Kil-hun, 59, male, KWP member
- Pyon Il-jae, 56, male, KWP member
- Cho Chae-il, 58, male, KWP member

Pyongan South Province, Taedong Township Cooperative Farm

- Ri Kil-song, 59, male, KWP member

1991.4.25

Entered KPA 1957.5.1 and served as squad leader in 724th unit. Discharged 1963.7.6 and worked at Taedong County cooperative farm since then.

Interviewees include:

- KPA unit 724 Political Section chief Ri Kil-su, male, 51, KWP member
- Pyongan South Province, Taedong County Township Cooperative Farm party secretary Ri Mun-hak, male, 52, KWP member

1991.6.27

Those who can access a person's RRP file are the provincial, city, or county Party workers from their committee's organization department, cadre department, general affairs department, education department, labor organization office, Office 39,<sup>87</sup> factory/enterprise Party committee leaders, the commander and political officer of the local Workers Peasants Red Guard unit, MPS Resident Registration officers, prosecutors, police detectives, security officials, SSD personnel, military mobilization officials who handle the draft and reserve forces, military mobilization Office No. 3,<sup>88</sup> Socialist Labor Youth League Organization Department cadre, college cadre, and general Party and governing administration cadre.<sup>89</sup>

A file requested for review cannot be removed from its place of origin, and reviewers can only view one record at a time. However, copying files by certain

personnel is permitted (see p. 62).<sup>90</sup> Those wanting to copy a file must receive permission from their supervisor and document this permission for the person in charge of the police files storage facility.<sup>91</sup> (These procedures were undoubtedly modified with the advent of digitalization of the system.)

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87 Office 39 is a KWP Secretariat level organization responsible for increasing Kim Jong-il's personal funds and investments. They are responsible for most of North Korea's illicit activities. For an in-depth view of this office's operations, see Paul Rexton Kan, Bruce E. Bechtol, Jr. & Robert M. Collins, *Criminal Sovereignty: Understanding North Korea's Illicit International Activities*, U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2010. <http://www.StrategicStudiesInstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=975>

88 Military Mobilization Office No. 3 is responsible for RRP investigations within the military.

89 Kim and Ri, *Project Reference Manual*, 116.

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90 The establishment of a computerized database system within the MPS undoubtedly changed this 1993 process of reviewing.

91 Kim and Ri, *Project Reference Manual*, 112.

92 *Ibid.*, 143-149.

<b>Songbun Core Class Categories</b> <sup>93</sup> (includes their families and descendants)	<b>Comments</b>
Revolutionaries; professional revolutionaries; those who fought with Kim Il-sung against the Japanese; those who fought against South Korea before and during the Korean War; those who fought against the Japanese elsewhere; those who fought with Kim Il-sung's father, Kim Hyong-jik, along with surviving families and descendants.	There are professional revolutionaries still alive who receive special recognition from the KWP Central Committee. Also, this does not include those who fought with the Independence Army fighting the Japanese (under leaders others than Kim Il-sung's factions)
Honored veterans to include those killed or wounded in action; civilians who died or were wounded in the Korean War while supporting the army; and their surviving families and descendants.	
Those who knew Kim Il-sung or Kim Jong-il, or otherwise recognized by the KWP Central Committee; and their families and descendants.	
National heroes	Laborers with special contributions to the Republic such as those who received the titles of Labor Heroes of the Republic or Labor Heroes
National laborers	Displaying loyalty to Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il superior to that of others
KIA veterans and KIA civilians	Personnel who served in the KPA or were part of armed guerillas fighting against South Korea; civilians who assisted the KPA during war
Patriots who sacrificed for socialism	Personnel who died while working in factories and enterprises; recognition of labor heroes and their families

The Manual uses the newer designation “basic stratum” for the core [*haeksim*] class and describes it as being comprised of those who give their total loyalty to the Kim regime and “will fight to the death to protect the Great Leader Kim Il-sung and the Dear Supreme Commander Kim Jong-il [presumably Kim Jong-un under the current leadership] and preserve Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-ilism.” The class is described as comprising: revolutionaries, honored veterans of the military, those who died or were wounded during the Korean War, those close to the Kim Il-sung family, national heroes, laborers, discharged soldiers, those who strived for the socialist revolution and the Korean Workers’ Party, as well as laborers, peasants, soldiers, and intelligentsia at the time of liberation.<sup>93</sup>

The Manual uses the term “complex stratum” for the wavering class and describes it as being comprised of individuals who have political problems in their background, socio-political behavior or performance, or family life. The complex stratum is made up of draft dodgers, soldiers who deserted, repatriated soldiers, those who cooperated with reactionary organizations or served the Japanese, South Korean soldiers who fought for the North or South Korean prisoners of war who remained in the North after the Korean War, those

93 *Ibid.*, 143. The reference Manual’s description of each of these classes goes into great detail, the inclusion of which would unnecessarily double the length of this report.

associated with the Kumgang Academy or No.10 Guerilla Operations<sup>94</sup> personnel, those who served time in political prison camps, religious figures, defectors to South Korea, those who were arrested and punished for anti-state activities, families of North Korean prisoners of war who did not return after the Korean War, those who defected overseas, landlords, rich farmers, capitalists, pro-Japan personnel, pro-U.S. personnel, religious personnel and their followers, factionalists, spies, agricultural foremen, entrepreneurs, and businessmen.<sup>95</sup>

94 The Kumgang Academy and the No.10 Guerilla Operations Area were led by Pak Hon-yong, a South Korean communist operating in Seoul who sided with the social revolution in North Korea and became the North Korean Foreign Minister. The Kumgang Academy trained guerrillas to operate in South Korea to foment socialist revolution. There was a rumor that they were approached by American representatives as part of a plan to undermine the leaders in North Korea. Another source explains that Pak actually led 4,000 members of the Kumgang Academy and the Party’s Liaison Department in a coup attempt against Kim Il-sung. Rumor or actual coup attempt, Kim Il-sung purged Pak, blamed him as a spy for the U.S., and held him responsible for the lack of revolution in South Korea during the Korean War. See “Hanguk Dongnan Jikhu Bukhan-eso Pak Hon-yong Yiraneun Mije Spy-raneun Numyeong-eul Sseugo Sukcheong Doen Yiyu-neun Yo? (What Was the Reason Pak Hon-yong Was Labeled an American Spy and Purged in North Korea After the Korean War?)” [http://kin.naver.com/qna/detail.nhn?d1id=11&d1rid=111001&docid=123869222&qb=67aB7ZwC7KCcMTDsp4DrjIA=&enc=utf8&section=kin&rank=1&search\\_sort=0&spq=0](http://kin.naver.com/qna/detail.nhn?d1id=11&d1rid=111001&docid=123869222&qb=67aB7ZwC7KCcMTDsp4DrjIA=&enc=utf8&section=kin&rank=1&search_sort=0&spq=0); and Ko Jae-hong, Kim Jong-il Chejeui Bukhangun Yeongu (Study on Kim Jong-il Regime’s Korean People’s Army (Seoul: National Security Strategy Institute, 2011), p.120.

95 Kim and Ri, *Project Reference Manual*, 149.

96 *Ibid.*, 149-157.

<b>Songbun “Complex Class” Categories<sup>97</sup></b> (includes their families and descendants)	<b>Comments</b>
Repatriated soldiers and repatriated citizens	Those who were prisoners of war in the South, whether soldiers or civilians
Those who cooperated with reactionary groups	Those who served in pro-South Korea security forces or cooperated with the enemy
Those who served in Japanese organizations before liberation	Those who served the Japanese colonial period as administrators, soldiers, police, or in the colonial legal system. This does not include technicians, artists, doctors, army privates or NCOs, drivers, or similar personnel
Liberation soldiers	Those who started as South Korean soldiers but defected to the North and served in the North Korean military.
Non-repatriated South Korean prisoners of war	Those South Korean prisoners of war in the North who remained in North Korea after the war
Defectors to the North	Those who defected from South to North Korea
Kumgang School or No. 10 Guerilla Operations Area personnel	Those associated with the South Korean communist Pak Hon-yong-led Kumgang Academy or the No. 10 Guerilla Operations Area
Religious personnel	Those who have not thrown off the teachings of ministers or religious teachers
Defectors to South Korea	Those from North Korea who left after liberation to go to South Korea. Their families are ideologically South Koreans
Anti-state, anti-party personnel	Those who have been punished for anti-party, anti-revolution, or anti-state activities

<b>Songbun “Complex Class” Categories<sup>97</sup></b> (includes their families and descendants)	<b>Comments</b>
Criminals	Those arrested for crimes by crime type – economic, political or ordinary crimes
Political prisoners	Those serving time in political prisons for anti-party, anti-revolution, or anti-state activities
Families of Non-repatriated POWs	North Korean soldiers who were POWs in South Korea and did not repatriate to the North after the Korean War
Defectors overseas	After liberation, those who betrayed the Party and the regime and defected to other countries
Others	Landlords, rich farmers, capitalists, pro-Japan personnel, pro-U.S. personnel, religious personnel and their followers, factionalists, spies, agricultural foremen, entrepreneurs and converted businessmen

The Manual identifies the “hostile stratum” as comprised of impure elements from the exploiting classes, those loyal to Japan or the United States, anti-party or anti-revolution elements, and those who do not cooperate with the authorities. They include landlords, rich farmers, businessmen, Japan supporters, U.S. support-

ers, religious personnel, factionalists, spies, agricultural foremen, entrepreneurs, and businessmen.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 157-8.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 157-162.

<b>Songbun Hostile Class Categories</b> <sup>99</sup> (includes their families and descendants)	<b>Comments</b>
Landlords	Possessed five jeongbo (1 jeongbo = .99 hectare) of land which was confiscated after liberation.
Rich farmers	Owned 2-5 jeongbo of land; hired 3 or more farm hands
Capitalists	Management of factory, enterprise, or store with Japanese or American enterprises, exploited and employed several workers
Pro-Japan personnel	Those who brutally served Japanese imperialism
Pro-U.S. personnel	Those Koreans who loyally served Americans
Evil religious personnel	Those who colluded with imperialism and sold out their country and people
Factionalists	Those bent on destroying the Party, unification and unity
Those complicit with factionalists	Those who conducted anti-party and anti-revolution activities
Spies	
Agricultural foremen	Those who managed the property of landlords
Entrepreneurs	Those who managed factories or enterprises with the Japanese or Americans
Converted Businessmen	Those who hired workers before liberation but who helped Kim Il-sung afterwards

The Manual is proof positive of the institutionalization of the world's most discriminatory system of controlling a citizenry's political views. It tells public authorities how to prepare documents designed to discriminate against specific citizens based on background and other factors that individuals are powerless to control. It sets up an official determination that is imposed

on individuals without their input and offers the affected individuals no recourse to contest its findings. It also provides evidence of extra-judicial punishment, in describing how individuals who have completed terms in political prison camps are to be mistreated even after they have completed their sentences.

## V. SONGBUN'S IMPACT ON PEOPLE'S LIVES

### Songbun and Party Membership

The Korean Workers' Party is the dominant political institution in North Korea. Article 11 of the 2009 North Korean Constitution states: "The DPRK shall carry out all its activities under the leadership of the party. And the core element of the party is the Organization and Guidance Department (OGD)." According to the Republic of Korea National Intelligence Service (analogous to the U.S. CIA), the OGD is "the party within the party."<sup>99</sup> Since Party membership is the key to privileges within the North Korean societal structure, inability to attain membership based on social background is a particularly harsh form of discrimination. As mentioned earlier, it is almost impossible for members of the hostile class to become Party members because they are viewed as unredeemable. Those of the wavering class can attain Party membership if their socio-political behavior and performance demonstrate trust and faithfulness toward the Kim regime. Indeed, attaining Party membership is seen as

<sup>99</sup> National Intelligence Service "Bukhan Nodongdangui haeksim Buseo (North Korea's Korean Workers' Party Core Department)," 2006. URL: [http://www.nis.go.kr/app/board/view?sc\\_param=M0318000&midArr=M03180000&fieldArr=&keyWord=&page=1&startDate=&endDate=&dataNo=23452&hcode=39077402012879299424981&viewNo=201](http://www.nis.go.kr/app/board/view?sc_param=M0318000&midArr=M03180000&fieldArr=&keyWord=&page=1&startDate=&endDate=&dataNo=23452&hcode=39077402012879299424981&viewNo=201).

#### Refugee Testimony on Class Discrimination in Occupation

*"My younger sibling was discriminated against because I lived in China for 13 years. All my brother had to do to join the party was to go to the army. However, his membership in the party was denied because of me."*

Testimony of a defector from North Hamgyong Province, as quoted in White Paper on North Korean Human Rights 2010 (Seoul: Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, 2010), 471.

the primary step to personal and family success for any North Korean.

After Kim Jong-il became the Director of the Organization and Guidance Department (and simultaneously Director of the Propaganda and Agitation Department) within the KWP Secretariat in 1973, he began a *songbun*-based cleansing of the KWP membership. He began at the city and county Party levels in 1973 followed by provincial and economic organization officials in 1974. In 1975, he expanded this purge to the Central Party Committee and the military, completing the project in 1976.<sup>100</sup>

During this time, 300,000 people lost their KWP membership and 500,000 were relocated. 600,000 people in their 20's and 30's who received new memberships

<sup>100</sup> Lee Song Ro, *North Korea's Societal Inequality Structure*, 317.

replaced them. Of the Party's 3 million members today, 65% are under the age of 35, as Kim Jong-il ordered. This is because those who were over 50, or had graduated from college before 1960 or those from the Hamgyong Provinces, were viewed as unable to follow Kim Jong-il with complete loyalty.<sup>101</sup> Dedication to Party objectives or to Kim Jong-il's father was apparently not enough to ensure the standing of Party members. Kim Jong-il demanded loyalty to himself alone, and sought to attain it through purges within the Party, based on *songbun* investigations.

Once Kim Jong-il was officially designated the successor at the Sixth Party Congress (1980), the *songbun*-based structure of inequality was hardened. As Kim Jong-il's power and influence grew, the privileges of the core class grew while others suffered.<sup>102</sup>

There were times when Kim Jong-il found it useful to project an image of reforming *songbun*. He issued a directive in 1985 to lessen the impact of *songbun* on those in the lower *songbun* classes. But at the same time, Party officials became more stringent in their application of *songbun* in social and economic policies. In 1993, a new Party policy line called upon "the basic masses" to "take the hands of the complex (wavering and hostile)

101 *Ibid.*, 318.

102 *Ibid.*

**Refugee Testimony on Class Discrimination in Occupation**

***"In 2006, I wanted to enter the party after completing military duty. I could not become a member because my family member defected to the South."***

Testimony of a defector from Ryanggang Province, as quoted in White Paper on North Korean Human Rights 2010 (Seoul: Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, 2010), 471.

class as common brothers in the eternal revolution."<sup>103</sup> Kim Jong-il probably sought to reduce the influence of South Korea on the masses. But the regime's primary focus always remains on eliminating threats and any reform efforts give way to regime security and caution. The arbitrariness of the system serves to keep everyone on edge, including the most loyal, making them fearful and obedient.

103 Lee Woo-young, *Jeonhwangi-ui Bukhan Sahoe Tongje Cheje* (North Korea's Societal Control During Transition) Vol. 99-11 (Seoul: Korean Institute of National Unification, 1999), 73.

## ***Songbun and the Criminal Justice System***

There are two types of crimes in North Korea—ordinary crimes and crimes of a political nature—and they are clearly distinguished in the North Korean criminal justice system.<sup>104</sup> Within this context, *songbun* classification plays an important role in North Korea's laws and legal system, leading to judgments and sentences that are discriminatory. Those of higher *songbun* typically get lighter sentences than those who commit similar crimes but are from the lower *songbun* classes. Indeed, the North Korean penal code recognizes political and class distinctions.<sup>105</sup> The Criminal Procedures Act of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Article 3, specifically states, "The state, in combating treason against the nation, distinguishes friend from foe and punishes hostile elements and prime movers severely while embracing their passive culprits...".<sup>106</sup> This is clearly consistent with the Party's *song-*

104 Kim Soo-Am, "The North Korean Penal Code, Criminal Procedures, and their Actual Applications," Korean Institute for National Unification, 2005; p.11. URL: [http://www.kinu.or.kr/eng/pub/pub\\_02\\_01.jsp?page=6&field=&text=&order=&dir=&mode=list&bid=DATA05&ses=&category=](http://www.kinu.or.kr/eng/pub/pub_02_01.jsp?page=6&field=&text=&order=&dir=&mode=list&bid=DATA05&ses=&category=)

105 2010 *White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea* (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2010), 186.

106 Criminal Procedures Act of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Article 3 (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1992), p.1.

***Mr. Hong Il graduated from high school and was drafted into the air force. He did so well during his service time that his chain of command recommended him for entrance into Kim Il-sung Political College. However, an SSD review of their records, which are more detailed than MPS records, found that Mr. Hong's father defected to the North from the South during the Korean War, and thus his songbun disqualified his attendance at such a high-level college. Consequently, he was sent to the mines to work as a laborer.***

Author interview with a defector, 17 February 2011, Seoul, Korea.

*bun* policy of identifying those perceived to be enemies of the state based on social classification. As stated earlier, the Resident Registration Project of 1966 to 1967 classified all North Korean citizens as friend or foe of the regime, and members of the hostile class are considered enemies of the state. The (South) Korea Bar Association conducted 100 interviews of North Korean refugees and 79% of them answered, "When people with no background [low *songbun*] commit a crime, they face harsher punishment because of their background."<sup>107</sup> In Kim Jong-il's own

107 "No background" here means poor *song-*

words, "The courts and prosecutors' offices are the reliable political safeguards of the Party and the *Suryeong* with the cost of their lives. They are a powerful weapon of the socialist revolution, protecting people's lives and properties from various criminal infringements."<sup>108</sup> Kim also stated that, "All investigations, court proceedings and surveillance activities must be in accordance with party policies as well as legal requirements," thus demonstrating that the party's policy on *songbun* plays a role in the court proceedings.<sup>109</sup> It is important to understand how the legal system functions. Legislative, executive, and judicial processes and institutions in North Korea accept that Kim Jong-il's word is law and his instructions take priority over everything else, including the North Korean Constitution, civil law, the North Korean penal code, and Party bylaws. As is the case in practically every aspect of North Korea's written policies and laws, what is written is not what is decisive.<sup>110</sup>

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bun, or family background. Source: Korea Bar Association (KBA). *2008 White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea*, Seoul, 2009, p.510.

108 Kim Jong-il, *A Collection of Selected Works of Kim Jong-il*, Vol. 7 (Pyongyang: Korean Workers' Party Publishing Company, 1996), p.311-322.

109 Kim Jong-il, "Sabeop Geomchal Sa-eop-eul Gaeson Ganghwa Haldae Daehayeo (On Improving Legal Prosecution Tasks)," *Kim Jong-il Collected Works*, Vol.7 (Pyongyang Publishing House: 1996) p.321.

110 *2008 White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea*, (Seoul: Korea Bar Association (KBA), 2009), 52.

North Korea's official political dictionary states that the North Korean judiciary's function is to guarantee the *Suryeong*'s teachings and ensure that Party policy is followed.

In North Korea, there is no separation of legal, administrative, and judicial powers.<sup>111</sup> According to the North Korean Constitution, North Korean courts are accountable to the Central Court, which in turn is subordinate to the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA).<sup>112</sup> Article 91 of the Constitution states in Point 12 that the SPA can elect or recall the President of the Central Court, and in Article 140, Point 5, the SPA can elect or recall judges and people's assessors of the court.<sup>113</sup> In other words, the North Korean courts are not independent and they do not conduct judicial review. There is no known case of the Supreme People's Assembly overturning or even modifying a decision of the *Suryeong*. It is a rubber-stamp legislative body doing the bidding of the Korean Workers' Party as required by the preamble to North Korea's 2009

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111 Lee Kum-sun, Kim Su-am, "Bukhan Inkwon Chimhae Gu-jo mit Gae-seon Jeol-lyak (North Korean Human Rights Abuse and Strategies for Improvement)" Ministry of Unification (Seoul: Research Series 09-11, 2009).

112 Article 168 of North Korea's 2009 Constitution

113 Steve S. Sin, "North Korean Constitution—April 2009," *Northeast Asia Matters*, October 8, 2009, <http://asiamatters.blogspot.com/2009/10/north-korean-constitution-april-2009.html>.

Constitution.<sup>114</sup> The Party, which takes its orders from the *Suryeong*, determines what is legal and what is not. Every institution and organization in North Korea maintains a Party committee and Party guidance officers who provide guidance on the Ten Great Principles of Monolithic Ideology and other applicable directives put out by Kim Jong-il. A principle of the Ten Great Principles of Monolithic Ideology is: "Fight on tenaciously with uncompromising combative spirit, firm revolutionary principle, indomitable revolutionary spirit, and faith in certain victory against the enemy class (emphasis added)."<sup>115</sup> This directive compels party-state leaders to ensure they see the hostile class as the enemy and treat them accordingly.

North Korea's civil law addresses the question of guilt or innocence. However, as shall be seen, what constitutes a serious offense and how sentences are handed out has more to do with dealing with perceived anti-revolutionary elements than it does with justice.

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114 "International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights," Office of the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights (1966), <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/ccpr.htm>; and Sin, "North Korean Constitution—April 2009."

115 "Life & Human Rights in North Korea," Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights (NKHR), Vol.62 | Winter 2011, cited at International Coalition to Stop Crimes against Humanity in North Korea, p.49. URL: [http://stopnkcimes.org/bbs/board.php?bo\\_table=reports\\_north](http://stopnkcimes.org/bbs/board.php?bo_table=reports_north)

When appointing Party officers or officials to the judiciary, those with poor *songbun* backgrounds are never considered. Those in the lower *songbun* classes have little recourse within the North Korean legal system. There is no attorney/client system in the North's legal system. All lawyers work for the state, none for the defendant.<sup>116</sup> Astoundingly, North Korean courts come under the surveillance and monitoring of the prosecution, as directed by Kim Jong-il.<sup>117</sup> This means that the accused, no matter who s/he is, is subject first to the authority of the prosecutor's office, not the judge or the court.

Even complaining about the injustices of this system can lead to time in prison. Article 57 of the North Korean penal code states there is no statute of limitations for "anti-state or anti-people" crimes. Anyone found guilty of these crimes is subject to punishment at any time, regardless of when they made the offending statement.<sup>118</sup> If anyone is found to have a relative in South Korea, they are immediately reclassified into the hostile class. In other words, if *songbun* updates reveal such facts, then one immediately suffers the consequences.

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116 2001 White Paper, 8.

117 Kim Jong-il, "Sabeop Geomchal Sa-eop-eul Gaeson Ganghwa Haldae Daehayeo (On Improving Legal Prosecution Tasks)," Kim Jong-il Collected Works, Vol.7 (Pyongyang: Korean Workers' Party Publishing House: 1996) p.321.

118 2001 White Paper, 188.

**Refugee Testimony on Discrimination in Sentencing and Punishment**

- **You get harsher punishment if you don't have a good background.**
- **A prosecutor's brother-in-law was made to stay home and not go to prison despite his crime.**
- **If you have a good background, and your siblings have important jobs, then you won't get punished.**
- **A woman won a gold medal in a world marathon competition and she and her father were moved to Pyongyang.**
- **If your parents contributed to the nation, then you are not punished for misdemeanors, while ordinary people are.**
- **People with good background get minor punishment or none at all while those with poor backgrounds are punished.**
- **Two people committed robbery together; one with a good background was released and the other died before a firing squad.**
- **Those with a bad background are not rewarded for good deeds.**
- **Ten people were executed by firing squad for stealing from a farm, but one whose father was a national hero was set free.**

Source: Refugee testimonies in Korea Bar Association (KBA). *2008 White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea*, Seoul, 2009, 510-515.

This approach is codified in North Korea's laws. Admittedly, Article 4 of North Korea's Criminal Procedure Act states that, "The state fully guarantees human rights in dealing with and disposing of a criminal case."<sup>119</sup> The regime consistently sets a double standard for the treatment of specific segments of society by adopting laws and policies that appear consistent with universally accepted norms, but

119 Criminal Procedures Act of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Article 4 (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1992), p.1.

includes a qualification such as "treating class or state enemies." Those who always suffer the most from this are naturally those of the lower *songbun* classes.

*Songbun* is an integral consideration in sentencing criminals. North Korean institutions of law distinguish between political crimes and ordinary crimes, thereby differentiating between types of crime and levels of punishment.<sup>120</sup> From the North Korean state's perspective, political crimes are committed by anti-revolutionary elements. "Anti-revolutionary elements" is a characterization of the *songbun* system's hostile class but also includes anyone countering the objectives of the regime. Courts and law enforcement agencies safeguard North Korea's socialist system and therefore distinguish between friends and foes of the regime. This is stipulated in Article 162, Section 2 of the 2009 North Korean Constitution, which states that courts will "ensure that all organs, enterprises, organizations, and citizens precisely observe the laws of the state and struggle actively against class enemies and all law offenders" [emphasis added].<sup>121</sup> Since the hostile class is already considered to be comprised of enemies of the state, all judicial organs in North Korea are required to work against its members.

120 *2008 White Paper* (KINU) Ibid, 133.

121 Sin, "North Korean Constitution—April 2009."

Article 2 of North Korea's Criminal Code states: "The State shall strictly identify enemies from friends in its struggle against anti-state and anti-people criminals, subdue the leading minority and embrace the following majority."<sup>122</sup> From the North Korean regime's perspective, judges must understand the principles of class struggle and receive KWP guidance in handing down congruent sentences.<sup>123</sup> North Korea's Criminal Procedure Law employs the term "class principle," implying that the state will identify class enemies. *Songbun's* hostile class is regarded as enemies of the state.<sup>124</sup> North Korean authorities insist that the Penal Code cannot be separated from politics and therefore judges must use party guidance in determining sentencing.<sup>125</sup> Consistent with earlier discussions on party policy and law, this means that party priorities and policies take precedence over law in the court room and that the party-directed use of *songbun* in criminal case judgments is to be expected and adhered to.

International criticism of the North Korean penal code has forced apparent improvements in the code; however, North Korea has not altered the political nature of

sentencing. Article 11 of the North Korean Legal Representation Law stipulates that attorneys are bound to "explain the nation's laws and regulations to the people, and to help the people obey these laws and regulations." In other words, their role is to explain to defendants the crime they have committed.<sup>126</sup> The task of North Korean attorneys is not to represent the accused but rather to protect the policies of the KWP.

Prosecutors are superior in hierarchy to judges in North Korea, and judges are politically responsible for the sentences they impose.<sup>127</sup>

Whereas average citizens are tried in open court, North Korean officials and Party members are tried in private: "the higher the *songbun*, the more discreet the sentencing." This practice facilitates granting people of higher *songbun* lower sentences than those of the lower *songbun* classes. According to SSD agent Kwon Hyuk, the SSD automatically prosecuted those of the lower *songbun* classes to the fullest extent, whereas those of the higher *songbun* classes received a virtual slap on the wrist for the same offense.<sup>128</sup>

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122 2008 White Paper (KINU), 134.

123 2008 White Paper (KINU), 132-4.

124 2010 White Paper, 186

125 *Ibid.*

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126 2001 White Paper, 30.

127 2010 White Paper, 190-92.

128 Author interview, 16 February 2011.

There are reports that executions and other sentences are decided based on *songbun*. One's records, including *songbun*-related documents, are presented to influence sentencing.<sup>129</sup> Leniency is available to the higher *songbun* classes, but unavailable to most of the wavering class and all of the hostile class. Being from a high Party background suggests that a person is redeemable. When members of one's extended family are Party members, a person gets a lighter sentence. Possession of awards from Kim Il-sung, or a "Certificate of Patriotism," weighs positively in sentencing.<sup>130</sup>

If a cadre commits a political crime, he is forced to sign a confession, warned, dropped from Party membership to Party candidacy, or possibly expelled from the Party. If it is an administrative violation, he is fined, with pay withheld, or fired and assigned to a laborer's job. Because cadre are of higher *songbun*, they cannot technically be forgiven. However, it is common to reduce the scope of investigation or lessen the punishment of one who commits a crime so as to avoid implicating higher levels in the chain of command. For those of lower *songbun* such as farmers and common laborers, investigators can make a reputation for themselves by intensifying the interrogation and putting pressure on whole communities.<sup>131</sup>

129 2010 White Paper, 245.

130 *Ibid.*, 245-6.

131 Im Yong-son, "Chulsin Songbun-eul Darun

## *Songbun* and the North Korean Gulags

The North Korean Criminal Act stipulates that there are six types of charges against those in political prison camps. They are very similar to *songbun* categories:

- a) class enemies—former landowners, collaborators with the Japanese, capitalists, or religious leaders and the descendants of these groups;
- b) collaborators with South Korean forces or relatives of someone who went to the South;
- c) anti-revolutionaries;
- d) opponents of the Kim regime;
- e) opponents of the Ten Great Principles of the Monolithic Ideology; and
- f) important people who tried to defect.<sup>132</sup>

Generally, those falling into the first three are already classified in *songbun*'s hostile class and receive the worst treatment the

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Ganbu Immyong gwa Chebeol Wonchik (Principles of Cadre Appointments and Punishment According to Songbun Background)," *Unification Economic Monthly*, August 1995, 108-110.

132 2008 White Paper (KBA), 523.

regime has to offer. The last three can come from any *songbun* class, although prisoners from a higher *songbun* level may be treated better than others. In a political prison camp inmates ostensibly have no *songbun*—they are just prisoners waiting to die in camp, or if lucky enough to survive, to serve out their sentence. In actuality, these individuals are in a *songbun* category unto itself, not identified as a category in the 51 sub-categories.

When an individual is sentenced to a political prison camp, families generally accompany them because they are guilty of “*yeon-jwa-je*,” or guilt by association. Guilt by association is a base principle of *songbun*. The North Korean state has used “*yeon-jwa-je*” as a major policy tool in social control. Kim Il-sung said, “it is necessary to root out three generations...” If one of the family members committed the crime, they are all guilty, or it is presumed they will be. This practice is used extensively against the hostile class. If a woman’s husband has committed a political crime and is sentenced to prison, she has to divorce him or join him in prison.

As mentioned earlier, those purged by Kim Il-sung in the 1950’s were banished to isolated communities in the northern provinces of North Korea which became the forerunners of the political prisoner camps. These areas were also populated

with those who opposed Kim Jong-il’s selection as Kim Il-sung’s successor before the official succession announcement in 1980. As the political prison camps became institutionalized, they were put under the control of the KWP Secretariat’s Organization and Guidance Department and administered for the most part by the State Security Department.<sup>133</sup> Their treatment was meant to be brutal. In 1968, Kim Il-sung stated that “if enemies of the class create riots in the *Kwan-li-so* (political prison camps), they must be stopped forever by deploying the Army.”<sup>134</sup>

In addition to the eight or so political prison camps, North Korea maintains smaller detention centers referred to as a “*Jip-kyul-so*” at the city and county level and “*Kyo-hwa-so*” detention centers at the provincial level. The *Jip-kyul-so* are designed to detain prisoners for six months whereas the *Kyo-hwa-so* are designed to incarcerate more serious prisoners for one to fifteen years. The North Korean MPS designed Pyongan Province’s Kaecheon *Kyo-hwa-so* for female prisoners, but refugee testimony indicates females are at other prisons as well. The MPS also designed the *Kyo-hwa-so* in Wonsan City in

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133 ROK Ministry of Unification, “North Korea 2009,” 338.

134 Republic of Korea National Human Rights Commission, “U.N. Human Rights Council Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review – North Korea: Our Sourcebook” (Seoul, 2009), 222.

Kangwon Province to incarcerate prisoners with contagious diseases, but serious transportation problems such as critical fuel and automotive spare parts shortages make single location isolation near impossible. Generally inmates are forced to perform 8-9 hours of heavy labor per day followed by 2 hours of indoctrination on the ideology of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il.

After serving time in the North Korean political prison camps, those who are released are treated as the lowest *songbun* class and lead a poor existence. The SSD gives priority to surveillance of them over others. When an ex-political prisoner commits an ordinary crime, ten years is added to any imprisonment sentence if he or she were formerly a political prisoner.<sup>135</sup>

It must be pointed out that North Korea has denied the existence of political prison camps in testimony to both the U.N. Human Rights Committee (a body of independent experts that monitors implementation of the ICCPR by its state parties) and the U.N. Human Rights Council (an inter-governmental body within the U.N. system responsible for strengthening the promotion and protection of human rights around the globe and for addressing situations of human rights violations). In the

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135 Data Base Center for North Korean Human Rights, White Paper on North Korean Human Rights 2008 (Seoul: North Korean Human Rights Archives, 2008), 116.

summary record of the 1945th meeting of the ICCPR's Human Rights Committee held on July 19 2001, North Korea's representative, Mr. Sim Hyong-il, stated in paragraph 31, "Committee members had referred to the cases of allegedly disappeared persons and the existence of *prison camps*. Those assertions reflected very marked political positions and were particularly offensive. The authorities of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea had already repeatedly expressed their views on those matters in international fora; the delegation would not revisit what it deemed to be totally spurious declarations founded on hearsay. It could only repeat that there were no *prison camps*."<sup>136</sup> Also, as stated in the Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review of January 4, 2010, the North Korean delegation at the 13th Session of the Human Rights Council's review stated that "the term 'political prisoner' does not exist in DPRK's vocabulary, and therefore the so-called political prisoners' camps do not exist."<sup>137</sup>

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136 See URL: [http://www.unhchr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/\(Symbol\)/677b1c9bedc2a984c1256b020053fd69?Op=endocument](http://www.unhchr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/(Symbol)/677b1c9bedc2a984c1256b020053fd69?Op=endocument)

137 See URL: [http://lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session6/KP/A\\_HRC\\_13\\_13\\_PRK\\_E.pdf](http://lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session6/KP/A_HRC_13_13_PRK_E.pdf)

## Songbun and Employment

Discrimination based on one's background dominates employment just as it does other major issues of life in North Korea. Choosing an occupation or seeking on the basis of merit a qualitatively better job is anathema to the entire North Korean economic system. Though there is room for advancement for those who show remarkable talent in science, class origin—*songbun*—and party loyalty come first while self-preference and qualification are the lowest priorities in being selected for a job.<sup>138</sup> In fact, North Koreans do not normally use Korean terms for “being hired” or “I got the job.” Instead, they all use the term “*baechi*” which means dispatched, deployed, or stationed when referring to how they went to work. This term is also used occasionally in South Korea, but it is the norm in the North.

*Songbun* has become a tool for determining individual economic roles and societal control. Occupational quotas that assigned heavy-labor jobs to the lower *songbun* categories and menial positions to the middle *songbun* class, coupled with a Public Distribution System that tied individuals to the work place, resulted in one

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138 Cho Jeong-ah, North Korea's Human Resource Development System, Ministry of Unification, Studies Series 06-06, 2006; p.42.

### Refugee Testimony on Class Discrimination in Occupation

***“One of my friends was a policeman. In 2000, he was expelled from the party and forced to leave his post because his father was arrested for having anti-socialist ideology. At the time, his father was a head of a police station in Pyongyang.”***

Testimony of a defector from Pyongyang, as quoted in White Paper on North Korean Human Rights 2010 (Seoul: Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, 2010), 472.

### Refugee Testimony on Class Discrimination in Occupation

Miss Ban, from Sinuiju, was a good student who wanted to be a doctor. But her good grades were not enough as she was turned down for medical school because she was from an ideologically “unreliable” family. Her grandfather was a businessman who employed few dozen people. Officially, the grandfather was from the exploitation class and, through guilt by association, so was she. Her parents were assigned to work on a cooperative farm. After that she tried to join the Army was denied that also. Miss Ban recalled, “They said, “We don't need a person who may betray us any moment and whom we can't trust.” “They think that I want revenge for my grandfather.”

Sergey Soukhoroukov, “I escaped North Korea after famine, violence,” The Telegraph, August 5, 2007. URL: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1559519/I-escaped-North-Korea-after-famine-violence.html>

### Refugee Testimony on Discrimination Against Hostile Class in the Choice of Occupation

***“After graduating, the Party decided my work place. Administration Council decides work places for graduates of engineering colleges, but for graduates of teacher's colleges, the district KWP Party controls their work places. There are no interviews and one's preference for certain jobs is not considered at all. One has to work where he/she is told to work. One cannot say, “I don't want to become a teacher.” There is no use for saying that.”***

Testimony of Kim Hui-geun, as quoted in Joanna Hosaniak, “Prisoners of Their Own Country: North Korea in the Eyes of the Witnesses,” Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights, 2004. p.61. URL: <http://eng.nkhumanrights.or.kr/main.htm>

of the most thorough economic control regimes in the world.

Occupations in North Korea are not the result of personal choice or preference, but of the needs of the regime.<sup>139</sup> With the approval of local KWP committees, the Labor Bureaus of regional People's Committees dictate work assignments.

Article 70 of the 2009 North Korean Constitution ostensibly guarantees each North Korean the right to choose one's occupation, but private commercial enterprise has been prohibited since 1958. All institutions—economic, social welfare, cultural, or other—are under KWP control.<sup>140</sup> Consequently, one's occupation is determined by the Party, and that occupation is dependent upon two criteria—one's family background (*songbun*) and the regime's labor requirements.

Before graduating from high school, each student fills out a resume that starts with his/her *songbun* status. From there, the local schools forward a copy of the resume to the labor office of the local people's committee (in addition to the local police for investigations in the Resident Registration Project). Depending upon one's status, individuals are assigned to join the military, move on to college, or

assume local work assignments based on Party-approved plans.

The KWP Organization and Guidance Department assigns senior personnel to national, provincial and county organization staff departments. In the military, that is carried out by the Organization Bureau of the Korean People's Army and its offices at subordinate levels. Loyalty to Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, and the KWP, as well as background, are critical elements in the qualification process. Because ability is secondary to these qualifications, the competent often end up working for the incompetent.

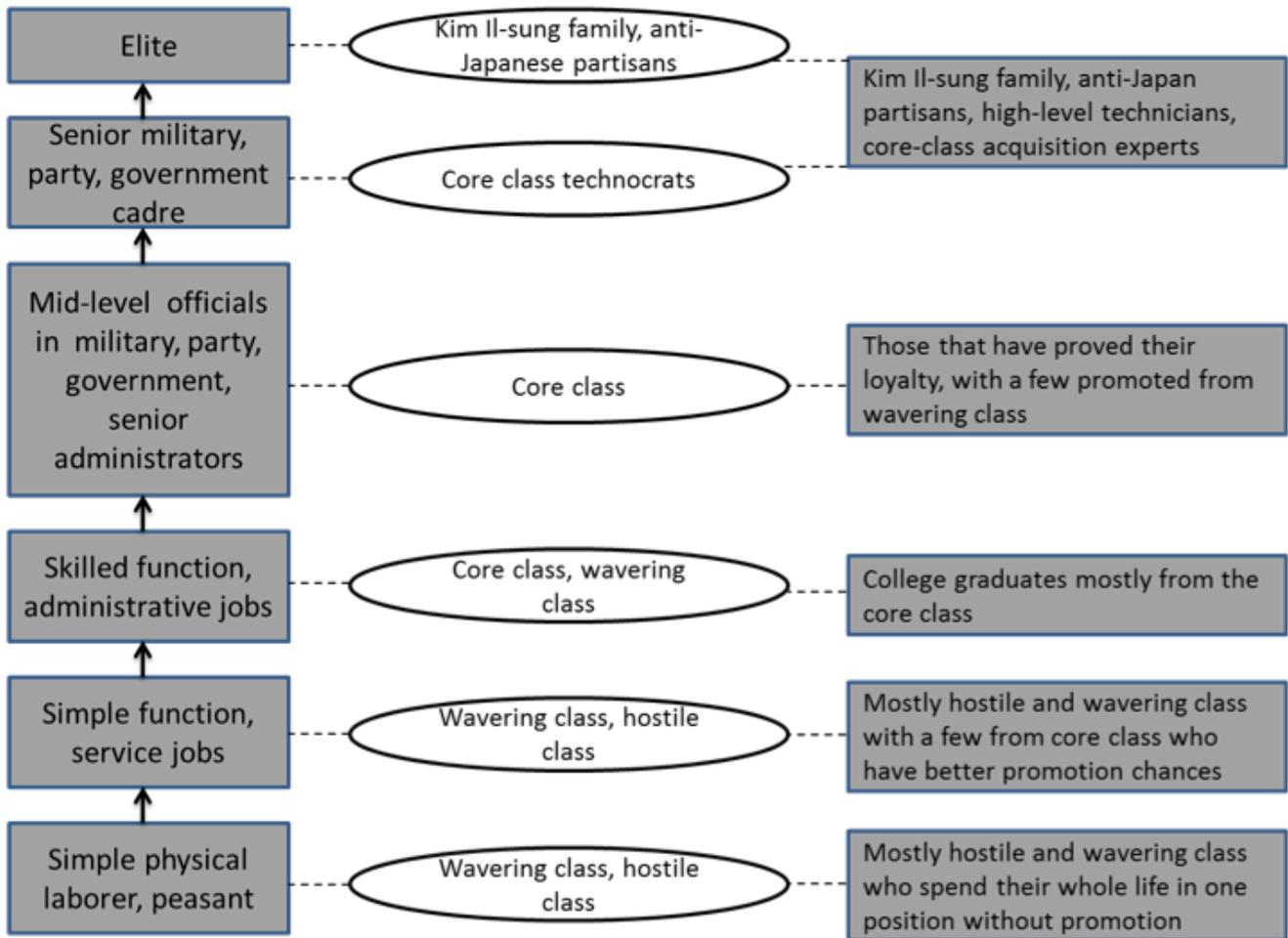
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139 1996 *White Paper*, 68.

140 *Ibid.*

Table 1. North Korea's Occupational Stratum<sup>141</sup>

North Korea's Occupational Stratum of Constrained Mobility



141 Lee Song Ro, *North Korea's Societal Inequality Structure*, 44.

Economic competition generally does not exist in North Korea.<sup>142</sup> Since individual North Korean citizens are detailed for life to a specific job or economic role, they must obediently accept their lifetime assignment to a single livelihood, whether miner or farmer or political leader. Furthermore, those who spend their adult lives in hard labor such as miners or farmers are destined to watch their children enter the same occupation upon graduation from middle or high school so their particular enterprise can sustain levels of production. Before 2000, most individuals in the hostile class were not drafted into the military, but this changed by the year 2000 when the military sought to maintain high personnel levels.<sup>143</sup> When they were admitted to the military, those of poor *songbun* were not assigned to frontline or sensitive positions.<sup>144</sup>

Because of the socio-economic privileges associated with such occupations, most North Koreans prefer to work for powerful agencies like the Party, the police, and the internal security system. But the results of background checks often preclude this.

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142 Certainly, competition exists within the permitted local markets, or in foreign currency making operations where providing funds to the regime is a sign of loyalty.

143 Author interview with Lee Song Ro, author of *North Korea's Societal Inequality Structure: Focus on Origins, Intensification Process and the Political-Economic Meaning*, and mid-level KPA officer defector.

144 Lee Song Ro, *North Korea's Societal Inequality Structure*, 42.

**Refugee Testimony on Class Discrimination in Occupation**

***“My brother graduated from an engineering school . . . He continuously applied for party membership but was never allowed because his father was a political offender. Also, he was never allowed into the military.”***

Testimony of Choi 00, North Pyongan Province, as quoted in White Paper on North Korean Human Rights 2010 (Seoul: Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, 2010); p.472.

For the SSD, checks extend to the third cousin level. No relatives may have served time in correctional centers, or been perceived as traitors or enemies of the state—their *songbun* must be impeccable from a Party perspective. In other words, the best jobs in North Korea are assigned based on *songbun* discrimination.<sup>145</sup>

People in the hostile class are not permitted to choose their profession as this is pre-determined by the occupation of their parents and/or grandparents. If his father was a miner or farmer, a male would normally follow in the same mine or farm cooperative unless he is drafted into the military. A female would likely do the same or be dispatched to work in a construction site.

Until recently, only the KWP could change one's occupation and place of employ-

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145 2010 White Paper, 237-38.

ment. That has changed to some degree in the past decade due to the pressures of North Korea's failed economy. New workers can sometimes bribe their way out of jobs the Party has assigned to them.<sup>146</sup> But for the most part, one's *songbun* continues to determine eligibility for job assignments, and all roads are blocked for those of lower *songbun* to advance to higher levels/classes, and thus better jobs, regardless of the occupational demand. Consequently, *songbun* leads to an economic dynamic that is antithetical to promotion based on merit.<sup>147</sup>

Kim Il-sung reengineered North Korean society so as to make the work unit the basic social element. Food distribution was tied to the workplace. Being of lower *songbun* meant being assigned to menial jobs that were labor intensive in heavy industry, mining, or agriculture. Quitting such jobs was unthinkable, because not reporting to your workplace meant that you not only would not receive your food ration, but might lose your housing associated with that work unit.

After the PDS failure during the great famine of the mid-1990s, many workers and their families starved to death if they did not find alternative food sources. The KWP controlled the distribution of products

146 2010 White Paper, 289.

147 Hunter, *Kim Il-song's North Korea*, 10.

**Refugee Testimony on Class Discrimination in Occupation**

***“My younger sibling wanted to enter the party in 2007, but was turned down because we have cousins in China and that is considered as a sign of bad foundation (songbun).”***

Testimony of, South Hwanghae Province, as quoted in White Paper on North Korean Human Rights 2010 (Seoul: Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, 2010); 471.

within the PDS, and the KWP prioritized the distribution of those products to people who worked in the central Party and government institutions—meaning priority to the higher *songbun* classes—and to the military. The consequence for the lower *songbun* classes that were at the low end of the PDS chain was that they received less food of lower quality.

The state assigns collective or group work tasks based upon the regime's economic project priorities. Personal preferences are never a consideration for work assignments.<sup>148</sup> As explained by Chin Kwang-ho who defected in 1990, “If someone is assigned via collective assignment, he is never given the opportunity to go home. In most cases his family will not see him

148 See 2012 Bukhan Yi-hae (Understanding North Korea 2012), Ministry of Unification Institution for Unification Education (Seoul, 2012), p.223. These priorities are frequently determined by Kim Jong-il himself and are easily assessed based on his very public “on-the-spot guidance” visits.

before they die."<sup>149</sup> When leaving the military, individuals receive work assignments based on *songbun* backgrounds and military records.<sup>150</sup> Blocks of discharged soldiers are sent to one specific work site to address a particular need in the national economic planning process. Another defector told this author how he was discharged after ten years in the KPA and sent to a collective farm. He was not able to see his parents before reporting for work, even though he had not seen them since being drafted.<sup>151</sup>

*Songbun* is a critical criterion for selection and appointment to a cadre position in North Korea. Cadre are always being retired or promoted or moved and those with high *songbun* are generally part of a continuous selection process. For every person selected to a cadre position, there is a background investigation that takes 3-6 months, shorter if one's father is already serving in a cadre position. Five persons must be interviewed per month in each case.<sup>152</sup>

Those with poor *songbun* backgrounds are never assigned to work on critically

important projects and are not employed in cadre-level positions.<sup>153</sup> They are housed in isolated areas so they cannot physically oppose central North Korean authorities during a crisis.<sup>154</sup> Assignments of hostile class workers to sensitive construction sites in support of national priorities such as missile or nuclear facilities is rare and then only applicable to nonsensitive construction areas.<sup>155</sup>

To give one an idea of what a workplace may look like in relation to classes of *songbun*, the Kowon Mining Company (near Hamhung City) has about 6,000 employees. The mining company party committee has 500 members of which approximately 100 party members who serve as cadre and the remaining 400 employees serve the party through positions in the Social Labor Youth League or the Labor Union. However, the *songbun* of those 400 is not considered good enough to become party members at the mining company.<sup>156</sup> The *songbun* of the remaining 5,500 personnel is

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149 1996 White Paper, 68.

150 *Ibid.*, 69.

151 Author interview, Yoo Sang-joon, 29 Feb 2010.

152 Im Yong-son, "Principles of Cadre Appointments, 108-110.

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153 *Ibid.*

154 *Ibid.*

155 Author interview with several defectors from high *songbun* backgrounds.

156 Pak Hyeong-Jung, Lee Kyo-Duk, Chong Chang-hyun, Lee Ki-dong, "Kim Jong-il Sidae Bukhan-eu Jeongchi Cheje (North Korean Political System in the Kim Jong-il Era)," Korea Institute of National Unification, 2004; p.198. URL: [http://www.kinu.or.kr/report/report\\_01\\_01.jsp?page=37&num=512&mode=view&field=&text=&order=&dir=&bid=DATA02&es=&category=6](http://www.kinu.or.kr/report/report_01_01.jsp?page=37&num=512&mode=view&field=&text=&order=&dir=&bid=DATA02&es=&category=6)

not adequate for any cadre position in the party or its sub-organizations.

Finally, Ministry of Public Security officials are currently (as of the date of this report) collecting all existing Resident Identification Cards for the purpose of issuing new cards that, in addition to the family data, residence and other personal information, adds data relative to the card holder's job.<sup>157</sup> This is the most recent example of how the North Korean party-state controls each citizen through a centralized data base and gives the individual MPS policeman specific information where a citizen should and should not be.

**Refugee Testimony on Class Discrimination in the Military**

***“My brothers and I were denied from the military because our father is from the South. I enlisted and was rejected when I was 17.”***

Testimony of a defector from North Hamgyong Province, as quoted in White Paper on North Korean Human Rights 2010 (Seoul: Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, 2010); 471.

157 Lee Beom Ki, “ID Cards Set for Regular Changeover,” *Daily NK*, August 3, 2011. URL: <http://www.dailynk.com/english/read.php?cataId=nk01500&num=8023>.

## ***Songbun and the Military***

Article 86 of the 2009 North Korean Constitution states, “Defending the fatherland is the supreme duty and honor of citizens. Citizens shall defend the fatherland and serve in the armed forces as prescribed by law.” Long before Kim Jong-il instituted “military-first” politics as his governing strategy, an individual was able to improve one’s status through service in the Korean

**Refugee Testimony on Discrimination Against Entering the Military**

- **My youngest son-in-law could not join the army because his grandfather was a landowner.**
- **Many of my friends could not join the army because of their background. The authorities find out about your background because of the documents that follow you.**
- **My friend could not join the army because his grandfather was Chinese.**
- **I heard a person could not join the army if your relative defected from North Korea.**
- **My father came from South Korea so my younger brother could not join the army.**
- **My father came from Japan so I could not go to a military base.**
- **I knew a Korean-Japanese who could not go into the army.**
- **A father of a neighborhood family said something wrong and went to a political prison camp. The children could not enter the army.**
- **My grandfather was a landowner. My father was evicted from Pyongyang and my brother could not go into the army.**
- **The children of most prisoners of war [from South Korea] could not go into the army.**

Source: Korea Bar Association (KBA), *2008 White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea*, Seoul, 2009, p.499-502. Names of testifiers replaced with number designations.

People's Army. However, not everybody is able to join the Army. North Korea maintains a universal draft and excludes those who are not physically able to perform, as do all other militaries. However, North Korea also excludes individuals based on their social-political background. However, those who possess a "hostile class" *songbun* have historically not been given the opportunity to serve in the KPA as they have been regarded by the Party and security agency officials as unreliable for such a sensitive and important mission.<sup>158</sup> This has very negative consequences for subsequent employment opportunities for the rest of their lives.

Those who receive military training must be unconditionally loyal to the Party, and those perceived as enemies of the state are not permitted to possess a weapon. In determining service eligibility in the Korean People's Army, *songbun* in effect determines a person's lifelong career as well.

If one serves in the military, he/she goes through three levels of investigation by three different internal security agencies where *songbun* is a central consideration in each investigation. When he/she graduates from high school, the MPS conducts an initial investigation that leads to the issuance of a citizen identification card

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158 ROK Ministry of Unification, "North Korea 2009," 101.

through the resident registration project and the completion of his/her first *songbun* file. One's basic *songbun* status is established in this process. A copy of this file remains with the MPS. After entering military service, the Korean People's Army Military Security Command begins a new file in a process parallel to the MPS investigation process and at the same time processes an identification card. The military identification card is distinct from the civilian citizen registration card that all North Koreans carry. After leaving the military and being assigned to a civilian occupation, the local MPS and SSD receive copies of the *songbun* file from the military which forwards the file through official MSC-MPS-SSD channels. From that point on, the SSD builds the *songbun* file based on social *songbun*. The local MPS then issues a civilian Citizen Registration Card.<sup>159</sup>

In today's North Korea, the military plays the leading role in the ideology of *songbun* (military-first), established by Kim Jong-il. Unless you are from an important family, not having served in the military is particularly harmful to one's life occupation/career. Although this is not a problem for members of elite families, it is extremely difficult to gain membership in the Korean Workers' Party without military service.

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159 Hyun Seong-il, "Studies on North Korean Personnel System," 6.

【표 3-1】 규률통계 및 비상사고 보고서철 1950년 6월 25일 (조선인민군 249군부대 5대대 문화부)

249 Unit Status Report, June 25, 1950

신대원성분통계표 Status of New Personnel by Songbun

Sub-Units	성분별 Songbun Type																	외국 출신 인원	정당성별					
	로동자 Laborer				농민 Farmer				사무원 Office Worker				학생 Student			기타 Other			공산당 원	민중당 원	기타 당원			
	남자	여성	부수	총합	토지 소유	토지 소유 비율	토지 소유 비율	토지 소유 비율	정산	정기	사회	당원	의사	교원	소학	중학	전문					대학	소시	수업
1중대	1			15	12				3	1				2	2	14	27					2	4	
2중대	1	1			21	2		1	1					1	14	29	9	6				1	13	
3중대	2	1	1	2	1	25	2		15	6	2				10	15		1				2	10	
중기중대				4	31			3	1					2	13	7	5					3	8	
45여리중대					1	1									15	1	2					1	3	
82여리중대	1	2	1		7	10			2	1					5	10	2						10	
경찰소대																								
반항소대					1	2										9	6						4	
공급소대	1				2	2										1								
통신소대		1			1									1	2								1	
위생소대																	4							
대대본부	2					2											1						1	
계	9	4	3	2	32	106	4		21	10	5	1		6	12	88	85	19	6			9	54	
구대원	9	5	5	5	38	253	3		18	2	1	1		1	4	59	6		2			1	89	
Totals 합계	18	9	8	7	70	359	7		39	12	6			7	16	147	91	19	8			10	143	

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249 Unit Status Report, June 25, 1950

구대원성분통계포 Status of Old Personnel by Songbun

Sub-Units	성분별 Songbun Type															외국군대참가유무			정당별								
	노동자 Laborer					농민 Farmer			사무원 Office Worker				학생 Student			기타 Other			외국군대참가유무	로동당	민주당	청우당					
	철공	전기	목수	채광공	자유로동	토지분배받은농민	토지분배안받은농민	토지몰수당원자	생업	정기장	회관	기타	의사	교원	소학	중학	전문대학	소시민					수공업	기타			
1중대					12	41	1					1			2	25	2								20		
2중대	1			1	4	52										12	2									7	
3중대			3	2		54	2		17						2	5										12	
중기중대	1				1	23																		1		8	
45미리중대	1				4	8											1		1							3	
82미리중대	1	1	1		6	12										1										4	
경찰소대	1			1	3	18				1						12										7	
반총소대	1					5																				1	
공급소대	1		1		3	14					1															5	1
통신소대	1	4		1	2	1										1	1									2	
위생소대					1	1						1	1					1								2	
대대본부	1				2	24			1	1	1					3										18	
Totals	계	9	5	5		38	253	3		18	2	1	2	1	1	4	59	6	2				1		89	1	

- 45 -

On the other hand, those who maintain core class *songbun* can easily become officers, and if they are members of the ruling elite, they are posted to easy (and often lucrative) assignments such as being border guards along the Chinese border, or they avoid service altogether. Those from the wavering class with marginal *songbun* can become officers but must be the best and brightest of their group. They can expect to rank no higher than colonel, though they may be better leaders and officers than their core class comrades. Unsurprisingly, the most important criterion in a successful military education is political ideology with a major focus on loyalty to the KWP. These personnel are inculcated with hostility to the enemy and a sense of mission toward unification.

The core class makes up approximately 30% of the military whereas the wavering class stands at 50% and the hostile class makes up 20% of the KPA. The core class makes up 80% of officers and all of the generals and admirals, while the wavering class makes up the remaining 20%. The highest position a wavering class officer can expect to attain is battalion commander (roughly leading about 500 personnel). North Korea's Ministry of People's Armed Forces (equivalent to South Korea's Ministry of National Defense or the U.S. Department of Defense) maintains a Military Mobilization Bureau. Under

the Military Mobilization Bureau there is a Provincial Personnel Procurement Commission (PPC) at each province and a County PPC at each county.<sup>160</sup> Each KPA division-sized element maintains a personnel procurement department and each of that division's regiments has a personnel procurement staff office of 1-2 officers. The regimental personnel procurement officer coordinates with the local PPC for replacement personnel. This varies by unit and time period and cross-province or cross-county procurement allocations take place as required.

**Refugee Testimony on Class Discrimination in the Military**

***"I enlisted in the military because I wanted to protect myself and build a foundation for my career. . . I was rejected. . . because my brother was a political offender. . . . I no longer had ambition in life."***

Testimony of a defector from North Hamgyong Province, as quoted in White Paper on North Korean Human Rights 2010 (Seoul: Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, 2010); 471.

The following example explains how the military draft system is impacted by *songbun*. A unit personnel procurement officer informs his local PPC that he needs 10 recruits. The PPC will give him a list of ten

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<sup>160</sup> Interview with mid-level military defector, 18 March 2011. In the past, each county PPC was comprised of 7-8 personnel, but that has increased to 10 personnel as of 2011.

names, all with a *songbun* ranking. Using the aforementioned class-based percentages, three of the recruits are of the core class, five from the wavering class, and two from the hostile class. (All are required to undergo one month basic training, normally at the battalion level.) The personnel procurement officer then chooses the three core class recruits for officer training or assignment to special construction brigades that work on very sensitive construction projects such as Kim Jong-il villas, nuclear sites, missile sites, and so on, based on the presumed supreme requirement of loyalty. The wavering class recruits are assigned to unit ranks as required. If selected at all, the two hostile recruits are assigned to low-level or heavy-labor positions to which the core and wavering class recruits are not assigned, such as general construction units<sup>161</sup>.

Even if they are allowed to serve, the hostile class cannot become officers. Soldiers from the hostile class cannot serve on the front line, because they are not trusted. They are sent to rear area assignments or construction brigades where they perform heavy-labor tasks. As stated earlier, hostile class soldiers are not trusted with weapons, because they are regarded as class enemies.<sup>162</sup>

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161 Interview with mid-level military defector, 18 March 2011.

162 *Ibid.*

**Mr. Chu, 44, was 9 when his father entered Yodok political prison camp. Because of his father, he could not serve in the military and his brother was discharged from the military for the same reason when the father entered Yodok.**

Author interview, 27 March 2011, Seoul, Korea.

Most, if not all hostile class residents, in provinces adjacent to the demilitarized zone between the two Koreas or in counties along the coasts or near Pyongyang were long ago relocated by political design. Consequently, procurement officers in those locations have predominantly core or wavering class personnel from which to choose. Supplemental requirements for additional personnel of lower *songbun* for general construction can be requested at any time. The concept of giving a weapon to a perceived enemy of the state deters military decision-makers from treating those of lower *songbun* with any trust whatsoever. Since the late 1980's, much higher percentages of the hostile class have been drafted into the military as military manning requirements have gone up with North Korea's expansion of the military. When lower *songbun* citizens manage to enter the military, some through bribe payments, they experience

discrimination in terms of promotions, duties, and assignments. Investigators from the State Security Department are responsible for determining whether an individual is eligible for military service.<sup>163</sup>

When recruits graduate from basic training, they stand in front of statues of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il and swear their allegiance, whereupon they are issued an identification card that describes them as “warriors of unification.”<sup>164</sup> For all, this is a rite of passage—those from the core class taking another pre-destined trip to success; for the wavering class, an opportunity for a better life; but for the hostile class, a life not significantly improved by long and loyal service in the militar

## **SONGBUN AND FOOD**<sup>165</sup>

As the 1998 Nobel Prize winner in Economics, Amartya Sen, has pointed out: “Inequality has an important role in the development of famines and other severe crises...famines and other crises thrive on the basis of severe and sometimes suddenly increased inequality.”<sup>166</sup> This very aptly describes the situation in North Korea as nowhere does *songbun* impact a North Korean more than in the food situation. As will be demonstrated below, there is a direct correlation between the population of North Korea’s northeast provinces, their low *songbun*, the failure of the Public Distribution System (PDS), and the severe famine of the 1990s. *Songbun*’s essential nature is the inequality that is deliberately created by design and the discrimination

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163 *Naver.com Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Bukhan-ui Gunsu Jedo (North Korean Military System),” <http://100.naver.com/100.nhn?docid=718395><http://100.naver.com/100.nhn?docid=718395>

164 *Ibid.*

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165 This section of the report is not designed to explain the food shortage problems in North Korea as a whole. There are several excellent references that one can access for that information, such as Stephen Haggard and Marcus Noland, *Hunger and Human Rights: The Politics of Famine in North Korea*, (Washington, DC: Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2005); Stephen Haggard and Marcus Noland, *Famine in North Korea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Andrew S. Natsios, *The Great North Korean Famine: Famine, Politics, and Foreign Policy* (Washington DC: United States Institute for Peace Press, 2001); and most recently, “Special Report: WFP/ FAO / UNICEF Rapid Food Security Assessment Mission To Democratic People’s Republic of Korea,” 24 March 2011.

Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 187.

166 Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 187.

that follows when that inequality is operationalized. Nowhere is that more evident than in the PDS.

Noted famine specialist Sue Lautze conducted surveys in North Korea following the great famine of the 1990s and observed:

**“There are reports that the DPRK government has stopped providing food through the PDS to marginalized regions. Given limitations of fuel and fiscal resources, it is only entrepreneurial local leaders, e.g. those who can muster train engines or trucks and fuel, who are able to acquire much-needed relief food to save their hungry populations. Those areas without economic resources or political capital seem to have been left to fend for themselves. In one sense, this is understandable, given the extent of economic collapse and widespread demands for limited quantities of relief assistance. However, the DPRK’s insistence on maintaining a full army and providing for the population of Pyongyang and other important areas at the expense of those who are suffering, diminishes this argument considerably.”<sup>167</sup>**

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<sup>167</sup> Sue Lautze, *The Famine in North Korea: Humanitarian Responses in Communist Nations*,

Though the North Korean government publicly insists that its social welfare system is superior to that of the West, the reality is that the regime has sacrificed its public welfare system for its military programs, particularly the nuclear and missile programs. Despite all of the money that the Kim regime made over the last two decades through illicit activities<sup>168</sup> and nuclear and missile proliferation,<sup>169</sup> North Korea has deliberately avoided investing in its failed medical system, failed agricultural system, failed light industry, failed transportation system, but most importantly, its failed PDS. Instead of investing in the PDS to support the population at large with adequate supplies of food, the Kim regime deliberately chose to invest in its weapons.

After the fall of communism in Europe, North Korea began to suffer extreme shortages in fuels, industrial equipment,

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Feinstein International Famine Center and School of Nutrition Science and Policy (Medford, MA: Tufts University, June 1997), 11. <http://nutrition.tufts.edu/docs/pdf/famine/nkorea.pdf>.

<sup>168</sup> For a detailed review of how the Kim Family Regime has developed revenues through illicit activities, see Paul Rexton Kan, Bruce E. Bechtol, Jr., and Robert M. Collins, “Criminal Sovereignty: Understanding North Korea’s Illicit International Activities,” (U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2010), <http://www.StrategicStudiesInstitute.army.mil/>

<sup>169</sup> For a detailed analysis on North Korean proliferation, see Bruce E. Bechtol, Jr., *Defiant Failed State: The North Korean Threat To International Security* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, Inc, 2010).

and raw materials. All of these disastrously impacted North Korean agriculture as well as the industrial and transposition areas designed to support it. A Korea Transport Institute researcher, Ahn Byung-min, has monitored the PDS through more than 40 trips to North Korea to monitor food aid. He describes the North Korean rail system as falling apart, "with rotten railway ties, different track gauges and bridges that are still pockmarked by bullets from the Korean War." He states that road networks are worse, thus isolating the countryside. His conclusion is that "North Korea has not only managed to cut itself off from the world, but also created an internally isolated underclass, mostly in the east, that is left to fend for itself."<sup>170</sup> Under these conditions, the residents of rural areas where the "enemies of the state" are isolated have no way of demonstrating their frustration with the party-state without the risk of immediate violence by the state.

The PDS ceased operation in most areas of North Korea during the mid-1990s which contributed significantly to the great famine of the latter half of the 1990s. Though *songbun* is not commonly thought of by humanitarian aid organizations in considering the role of North

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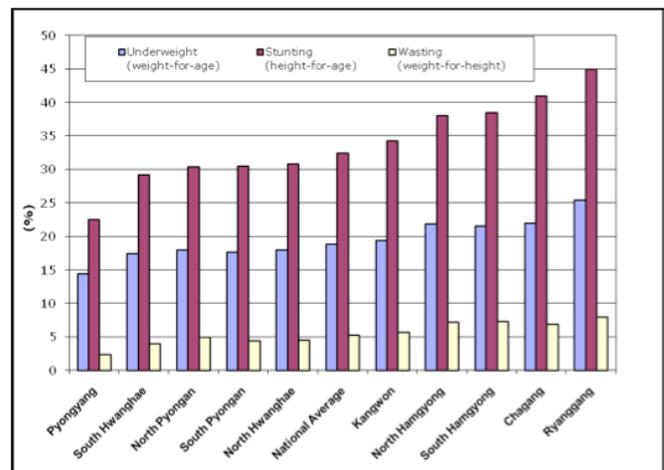
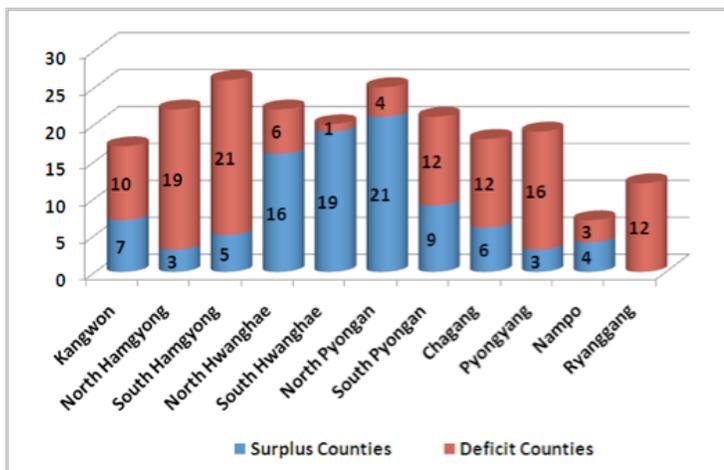
170 The Economist, "Food and stability in North Korea: Deprive and rule – Why does North Korea's dictatorship remain so entrenched despite causing such hunger and misery?" September 17, 2011. URL: <http://www.economist.com/node/21529063>.

Korean food security issues or the failure of the PDS, evidence indicates it does have an impact on food distribution through distribution priorities set by the Party. The lower the *songbun*, the lower one's economic opportunity, which results in poorly compensated employment, inhibiting one's ability to cope with food security. Therefore, the famine hit those with lower *songbun* the hardest, particularly those who lived in towns and cities where famine coping mechanisms were unavailable.<sup>171</sup> As mentioned earlier in this report, the northeastern provinces of North Korea are predominantly populated by those deemed impure elements who were forcibly relocated there starting in the late 1940s.

Dependence on the PDS by the lower *songbun* groups left them unprepared during the great famine of the mid-1990s, and its recent failures have once again made those of lesser *songbun* vulnerable. Thus, a consequence of individuals being classified with poor *songbun* a decade ago led to their descendants being disadvantaged in food distribution today. Those descendants not only suffer from greater malnutrition, but poorer health care as well. It is not unreasonable to conclude that some North Korean babies suffer from *songbun* even before their birth since their

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171 Lee Song Ro, North Korea's Societal Structure, 326.



mothers are underfed and receive poor prenatal care.

PDS distribution priorities were and are a direct, deliberate reflection of North Korea's social class structure. Those in the KWP with high *songbun* make all the rules;<sup>172</sup> and they give priority to feeding themselves, which the Kim regime expects, as part of their socio-economic privileges and rewards. Those with higher *songbun* respond without hesitation because they have been taught to reinforce class struggle through each phase of their life in order to succeed within the North Korean political-economic system. The *songbun* system is not only designed to identify the regime's political friends and foes, but it provides a prioritization for North Korea's PDS program as well.

The Kim regime has regularly sought to

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 38-9.

restrict the access of international aid agencies to certain counties and channel the food aid from international organizations and foreign countries to those that serve the interests of the regime best. Accounts by North Korean refugees and aid givers about regime diversion of food aid are legion.

In the first of the charts from the 2011 WFP/FAO/UNICEF Rapid Food Security Assessment Mission to North Korea, one can see that there are greater food deficits in the PDS in those northern areas of North Korea.<sup>173</sup> In the second, one can see that there have been greater health problems in the same areas of North Korea due to the lack of food and malnutrition over several years. The four northern provinces of North and South Hamgyong, Chagang and Ryanggang show greater signs of

<sup>173</sup> "Special Report: WFP/FAO/UNICEF Rapid Food Security Assessment Mission To Democratic People's Republic of Korea," 24 March 2011, 17.

North Koreans being underweight, stunting, and wasting.<sup>174</sup>

Residents of the northern provinces, particularly North Hamgyong Province, have been and are more vulnerable to the failure of the PDS. This is starkly evident when one realizes that 70% of refugees from North Korea are from North Hamgyong Province. South Korea has announced that 13,583 out of about 23,000 refugees currently in the South are from that province alone. Compare this with only 2.9% of refugees coming from North Pyongan Province, and one can get a sense of how the Korean Workers' Party has de-prioritized the Hamgyong area of North Korea.<sup>175</sup> The reasons for defecting from one's country always vary, but the lack of food is obviously a dominant factor in these astounding figures. As demonstrated earlier in this report, the Hamgyong area has been a dumping ground for North Korea's perceived enemies and their de-prioritization should not be viewed with surprise.

In contrast, there are numerous reports of those of higher *songbun* eating adequately, if not well. Recent reports from foreign diplomats tell of food shelves being well

174 *Ibid.*

175 "Most N.Korean Defectors Come from N.Hamgyong Province," *Chosun Ilbo*, May 16, 2011. URL: [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2011/05/16/2011051600998.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2011/05/16/2011051600998.html).

stocked in Pyongyang.<sup>176</sup> North Korea's prioritization of food distribution to the regime's elite and core class of high *songbun*—particularly citizens of Pyongyang—has left most of the North Korean population competing in food distribution with those most powerful in communities outside Pyongyang, namely those in the Party, government, military, munitions industry, national police (MPS), the secret police (SSD), and prosecutors, followed by teachers and doctors.<sup>177</sup> As demonstrated in the previously discussed *Weekly Chosun* article, Pyongyang is populated by loyalists. About 99% of all Pyongyang residents are members of the Korean Workers' Party, candidate members of the KWP, or dependents of the KWP members.<sup>178</sup>

In the current years of depleted supplies of food, the majority of North Koreans must purchase food in the markets to supplement the smaller rations they receive from the state. Making matters worse is the diversion to the military and elite *songbun*

176 "British envoy says Pyongyang's markets well stocked with foods and products," *Yonhap News*, March 27, 2011, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/northkorea/2011/03/27/0401000000AEN20110327001700315.HTML>

177 *2008 White Paper* (KBA), 498.

178 Kim Dae-hyon, "NK State Security Department Data on Physical Data of 2,100,000 Pyongyang Residents," *Weekly Chosun Magazine*, October 24, 2011. URL: <http://weekly.chosun.com/client/news/viw.asp?nNewsNumb=002177100002&ctcd=C01>. accessed 24 Oct 11. This article states that 41.5% of all KWP members live in Pyongyang.

classes of humanitarian aid from foreign countries as well as domestic food production. To this effect, there are numerous cases reported in the press and through North Korean refugee testimony, but the following example (prior to the 2008 monitoring systems being introduced) is particularly striking: In its Situation Report on the Occasion of the Examination by the UN Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights of the Second Periodic Report of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the Paris-based International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) reported that a former sergeant and driver of the KPA 1st Corps, Jin Yong-gyu, testified that "all food received from foreign humanitarian organizations that arrived at Port Wonsan was diverted to military provisions. The food was distributed to the 1st Corps in Kangwon Province, 2nd Corps near Cheolwon, and 5th Corps in Pyongyang." Mr. Jin stated he distributed food four or five times a year. To deceive UN inspectors, the military changed their vehicle license plates and wore civilian clothes. During UN inspection visits, donated rice bags were stored temporarily at civilian warehouses, then transported to military units after the inspectors left.<sup>179</sup>

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179 "MISERY AND TERROR: Systematic Violations of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in North Korea," (International Federation for Human Rights: 2003), 12. <http://www.fidh.org/MISERY-AND-TERROR-Systematic-Violations-of>

This led relief organizations to introduce far more sophisticated monitoring systems in 2008 and 2011, which they now consider somewhat effective.<sup>180</sup> However, a 2011 poll conducted by Network for North Korean Democracy and Human Rights of 500 North Korean defectors revealed that 78.2% of defectors did not receive foreign grain aid when they lived in the North some years before. Too many cases undoubtedly remain where the Kim regime takes back distributed aid as soon as international monitors depart.<sup>181</sup>

Based on the data presented heretofore the classification of individuals to be of low *songbun* parallels the Party's justification for de-prioritizing "enemies of the state."

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180 See for example Dorothy Stuehmke, "Should We Feed North Korea?" *Los Angeles Times*, April 21, 2011; Jeff Baron as quoted in *The Nelson Report*, March 7, 2011; Statement of Allan Jury, World Food Program, at Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 10, 2012; and "U.S. Envoy says assured North Korea aid will go where needed," *Reuters*, March 8, 2012.

181 "78% of N.Korean Defectors Never Saw Foreign Food Aid," *Chosun Ilbo*, April 6, 2011, [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2011/04/06/2011040600985.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2011/04/06/2011040600985.html).

## ***Songbun* and Education**

North Korean revolutionaries, even before the founding of the North Korean state, established the classroom as a primary tool for re-educating the masses. Under the Soviet Civil Authority and the early North Korean state before the Korean War, teachers from the Japanese colonial administration were replaced. The peasant and laborer classes were recruited on a large scale to attend some form of "political school" and then were made teachers, though few had more than an elementary school education.<sup>182</sup>

North Korea claims to provide eleven years of education, but its benefits do not extend to all equally.

Education policy is set not by the Ministry of Education but by the KWP Secretariat's Science and Education Department,<sup>183</sup> which takes its lead from the KWP Congress and KWP Central Committee. In establishing educational policy, the KWP Educational Department issues detailed guidelines which are carried out by the government's Ministry of Education.<sup>184</sup> Education focuses

182 Charles Armstrong, *The North Korean Revolution: 1945-1950*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 174-180.

183 <http://ko.wikipedia.org/wiki/%EB%8C%80%ED%95%99>

184 Choi Eun-soo, *North Korea's Educational*

on Kim Il-sungism and science, and at the center of Kim Il-sungism are the Ten Great Principles of Monolithic Ideology.

***Ms. Kim of Hamgyong North Province grew up knowing she was of higher songbun and felt no guilt as a student that others were not accorded the same opportunity. As a child of a KWP member, advancement to a good school was no problem—she attended the Pyongyang Light Industrial College and was trained as an engineer. Like many of good songbun standing, upon graduation she served in the Three Revolutionary Teams at a factory where it was her job to ensure that Juche and the ideological thought of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il were an integral part of that factory's industrial process.***

Author interview, 13 January 2011, Seoul, Korea.

### **Refugee Testimony on Class Discrimination in Education**

***"I could not go to the university I wanted because my parents were laborers...My goal was to become a writer, yet I was admitted to a school that specializes in construction, which I never hear of. In North Korea, students do not apply to schools they want; they are positioned to schools as decided by the central party."***

Testimony of a defector from South Hamgyong Province, as quoted in White Paper on North Korean Human Rights 2010 (Seoul: Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, 2010); 387.

Policy, (Seoul: Soongsil University, 1996), [http://www.fortunecity.com/meltingpot/champion/65/dprk\\_edu.htm](http://www.fortunecity.com/meltingpot/champion/65/dprk_edu.htm)

*Ms. Kim Chong-kum (alias) of Chongjin knew she had bad songbun stock because her parents constantly fought over the issue. Her mother's father was reported to have gone to South Korea during the Korean War and her father believed that this was the reason that he could not join the Korean Workers' Party. Ms. Kim went through grade school knowing that no matter how well she performed academically, she doubted she could ever advance academically. Regardless, she always strived to be first in her class and found it unbearable if she was second in any category. She dreamed of becoming a teacher and attending the Kim Hyong-jik University of Education (named after Kim Il-sung's father), the most renowned teachers' college in North Korea. She gave up thinking she could succeed at this goal. Instead, she began work in construction after high school. She emphasized how much she resented those with good songbun who did not have to work hard for their academic advancement.*

Author interview, 13 January 2011, Seoul, Korea.

As in most societies, academic success in North Korea is defined for the most part as advancement to higher levels of education. But by the time North Korean children reach middle school, they already have some experience with how *songbun* affects their lives in relation to their peers, though they likely do not understand it.

#### Refugee Testimony on Discrimination Against Lower *Songbun* in School

- I learned about *songbun* at the age of 16 years old. When we studied in school, we learned who was bad and who was good in terms of *songbun*. School lesson plans, movies and propaganda all taught these themes.
- Students at my school who were recruited for sensitive positions in the party or state were selected based on their good *songbun* status by the recruiters who did not have sufficient time to go thorough background investigations otherwise.
- If one's parents had a good job, they knew they had good *songbun*.
- I filled out a resume for admission to college when I was a senior in high school. That resume included the background *songbun* of my father who became a party member while he was a worker. I had to write this when entering a privileged school. But I was too young to understand.
- I never saw my *songbun* documents.

Source: Author interview with North Korean defector on 25 January 2010.

*Songbun* in the classroom becomes the ultimate definer of achievement—those with good *songbun* come to realize that advanced educational opportunity is directly linked to their family background and expressions of political loyalty to the Kim regime. For them, academic advancement is as much a benefit of their parents' position in life as of their own academic performance.

Students of higher *songbun* can look forward to advanced degrees and influential occupations with a significantly better quality of life, to include food, housing, and medical treatment. For those with poor *songbun*, their family background

generally does not permit advanced education beyond high school (except for technical schooling). Consequently, educational deprivation leaves them with little hope to obtain influential positions and relegates them to continued poor food security, lower-grade housing, and poor medical treatment.

According to North Korean defector Park Su-hyun, the International Federation for Human Rights reported that Kim Il-sung or Kim Jong-il gave instructions that the children of high-ranking North Korean officials would enter college and that these students were called the “instruction student,” or “directed student,” or “student who received word.”<sup>185</sup> It is under this guidance that those with the better *songbun* receive preferential treatment and those with lower *songbun* are deliberately given diminished evaluations.

Students whose families possess good *songbun*, including Party membership, receive privileged treatment from teachers. Those same teachers restrict opportunity to students of lower *songbun*, especially if their parents are not members of the Party. Teachers limit opportunities for such students even if they perform well in class. This institutional bias first becomes obvious when teachers ask the children of

185 “Misery and Terror,” 8-9, <http://www.fidh.org/MISERY-AND-TERROR-Systematic-Violations-of>

**Mr. Ha, 39, worked in a coal mine after the army, as did his father and mother. His mother was a Korean born in Japan who returned to North Korea when she was 14. She could not enter university because of her background and Mr. Ha received the same treatment after being discharged from the army. When asked whether *songbun* still mattered in North Korea he insisted that was obviously the case.**

Author interview, 27 March 2011, Seoul, Korea.

KWP members to stand in class to discuss a project or receive an acknowledgment excluding others who sit quietly. The impact is deliberate and no doubt confusing to the other students.

One defector recounted that because she and her siblings carried their father’s tainted blood they faced limited opportunities to advance. She noted that if children knew about their poor *songbun* level they would not “bother to study hard, to practice their musical instruments or compete in sports,” because they are “barred from the best schools and the best jobs.”<sup>186</sup>

In a South Korean NGO report, North Korean refugees reported that women students who belonged to higher *songbun*

186 Barbara Demick, *Nothing to Envy*, (New York: Random House, 2009), 28–32.

classes maintained relations with women with similar *songbun* levels and generally did not associate with other women of lower *songbun* classes. They became aware of others' *songbun* rankings when school teachers distinguished between students in school. Those with higher *songbun* received favorable treatment over those who did not. Of the 22 women who were interviewed for that report, they collectively felt that poor *songbun* was impossible to overcome as an obstacle to receiving a higher education.<sup>187</sup>

Even those within higher *songbun* must compete to enter the most prestigious universities, so the effect of the system on their academic achievements may not be fully realized by the students themselves.<sup>188</sup> They may think they are competing on a level playing field even when they are not. In interviews with eight former residents of Pyongyang, all with the good *songbun* necessary to live in Pyongyang, they all acknowledged there was stiff competition for entry into the better schools, particularly Kim Il-sung University.

Yet university placement depends on

187 NKHR Briefing Report No. 4, "Flowers, Guns And Women On Bikes." Briefing Report on the Situation of Women's Rights in the DPRK," (Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights, 2009), [http://eng.nkhumanrights.or.kr/board/bbs\\_view.php?no=19&board\\_table=bbs\\_report&page=1&word=&searchItem=&cate\\_id=](http://eng.nkhumanrights.or.kr/board/bbs_view.php?no=19&board_table=bbs_report&page=1&word=&searchItem=&cate_id=), 2009.

188 Hunter, *Kim Il-sung's North Korea*.

whether one's father or mother works in the Party, state, or military hierarchy. This system has been in effect since the 1950s, and bribes have always been part of the entrance process at the better universities even at this early date. Those of the "Ppalchisan line" (those whose father or grandfather fought with Kim Il-sung as anti-Japanese partisans) are of the very highest *songbun* and therefore find it easier to get into Kim Il-sung University. In descending order, the *Yongnamsan* line (revolutionaries who built the state and reconstructed society from 1946 to 1957) and the *Nakdong-gang* Line (soldiers who died or fought southward in the Korean War down to the Nakdong River, also known as the Busan Perimeter) are considered of very high *songbun*, but come after the *Baekdu-san* line in Party-regime treatment and privilege. None of the descendants of the *Baekdu-san* line could recall attending school with someone of lower *songbun*. Families from the wavering or hostile classes are not permitted to go to school in Pyongyang.<sup>189</sup>

#### **Discrimination Against Lower *Songbun* in School**

- **They (*lower songbun*) were discriminated against badly at school.**

Source: Korea Bar Association (KBA). 2008 *White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea*, Seoul, 2009, 515.

189 Author interviews with North Korean defectors of higher *songbun*.

For the families in these very high *songbun* rankings, North Korea also operates elite schools including the Mankyong-dae School, the Kang Ban-sok Institute, and Namsan High School. These schools were specifically created for the children of descendants of the revolutionary martyrs.<sup>190</sup> These schools were established for the elite even before the *songbun* classification system became formal. No wavering or hostile class children and very few children of high *songbun*, outside of the three “lines” mentioned, are allowed to attend these schools, and special schools like these do not exist outside of Pyongyang.

## ***Songbun and Housing***

North Koreans are allocated individual homes or apartments that are in keeping with their *songbun* status.<sup>191</sup> All housing is owned by the state or cooperative organizations and every family is assigned a dwelling for use. Housing size, style and location are strictly assigned on the basis of class and *songbun*-based occupation/position.<sup>192</sup> Officially there are no privately owned dwellings in North Korea, though recent corruption has generated some level of housing exchanges with a commensurate exchange of cash. The ones who receive the best housing from the government naturally get the benefit of “selling” it to others.

### **Refugee Testimony on Discrimination Against the Hostile Class in Housing**

- **They usually live in rural mountain villages.**
- **They cannot live in Pyongyang or border areas.**
- **Mining towns are full of people with poor backgrounds.**
- **They must live in poor rural areas or mining towns.**

Source: Korea Bar Association (KBA). *2008 White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea*, Seoul, 2009, 508-510.

There are five levels of housing in North Korea which are administered and assigned by the state.

The first and lowest level of housing is comprised of apartments, farmers' houses, and older houses provided to general laborers, white collar workers, agricultural workers, and farm community residents. First level housing makes up about 60% of all housing.

<sup>191</sup> Misery and Terror," 8, <http://www.fidh.org/MISERY-AND-TERROR-Systematic-Violations-of>

<sup>192</sup> Republic of Korea Ministry of Unification, "North Korea 2009," 347; and Kim Byong-ro and Kim Song-chol, "North Korean Society's Inequality," 51-52.

<sup>190</sup> 2010 White Paper (KINU), 230.

Ordinary workers live in level two or three housing that has one room and a kitchen or two rooms and a kitchen for two families. It takes four to five years for newly-married couples to get their own home due to a general housing shortage.<sup>193</sup> Second level housing is provided to provincial guidance officers, city and county section directors, enterprise section directors, school teachers, and *Cheollima* project team leaders (ideological quality control personnel).

Third level or middle grade housing constitutes single family dwellings or newer apartments and is provided to central government guidance officers, provincial agency deputy directors and above, enterprise directors, and school principals. Third and second level housing together makes up approximately 25% of all housing.

Fourth level housing encompasses newer high-rise apartments approximately 121 m<sup>2</sup> to 182 m<sup>2</sup> in size and is provided to Party section directors, government bureau directors, people's actors, honored artists, college professors, and enterprise directors. Fifteen % of the population lives in fourth level housing or above.

Special-class housing is provided to Party

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193 Misery and Terror," 8, <http://www.fidh.org/MISERY-AND-TERROR-Systematic-Violations-of/>; and Kim Byong-ro and Kim Song-chol, "North Korean Society's Inequality," 51-52.

vice-directors, cabinet officials and above, as well as military generals and admirals. Those in the hostile class are assigned housing separate from other classes. Most of them are housed in isolated mountain villages where they perform hard labor at mines and farms.

Only individuals of the core class—those with good *songbun*—live and work in Pyongyang, except for a very select few from other *songbun* classes who serve the core class.

The regime re-assigns housing and relocates parts of the population at will. According to North Korea's highest ranking defector, Hwang Jang-yop, the Kim regime dispersed segments of the Pyongyang population to other areas when it wanted to restructure and reduce the size of the central government.

Specific political events also justified relocations. Residents regarded as "impure elements" were forced to leave the city after the Pueblo Incident in 1968.<sup>194</sup> After the Axe Murder Incident at Panmunjeom in 1976, those with poor *songbun*, approximately 250,000 citizens, who lived in the vicinity of the Korean Demilitarized Zone in Kangwon or Hwanghae Provinces were

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194 Hwang Jang-yop, "Hwang Jang-yop Speaks: Testimonies of North Korean Defectors," National Intelligence Service, <http://www.fas.org/irp/world/rok/nis-docs/hwang5.htm>.

forcibly evicted from their homes by the SSD and moved to the Hamgyong Provinces. Some 25,000 citizens from 8,000 families in Pyongyang were also summarily relocated. All were told to pack their things and were immediately relocated without being able to tell their neighbors. This gave rise to the North Korean saying: "you sleep, you're gone." Impending war was cited by government authorities as the reason for this action.<sup>195</sup>

There were reports in 2011 that 300 households were expelled from Hoeryong, North Hamgyong Province near the border with China because their relatives had defected to South Korea. They were relocated to a "farming cooperative" in Kumya County, South Hamgyong Province, where the "farm" is surrounded by barbed wire fences, guard posts, and guard barracks built to block access to and from the outside.<sup>196</sup>

Similarly, in the spring of 2011, the regime reclassified and resettled families who have relatives in South Korea out of fear that they will receive news of the "Jasmine Revolution" in the Middle East and undertake actions against the Kim regime.<sup>197</sup> The

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195 Lee Song Ro, *North Korea's Societal Structure*, 316.

196 Joo Sung-ha, "NK relocates escapees' families to concentration camps," *Dong-a Ilbo*, April 9, 2011, <http://english.donga.com/srv/service.php3?bi code=050000&biid=2011040940728>

197 Kim Young-shik, "N. Korea expels defectors'

workers who had been sent to Syria and Libya were forced to stay in place and not evacuated as others from around the world were. Their families back in North Korea found themselves victims of new suspicions.

No matter how innocent of intrigue the families of those who had worked in the Middle East may have been, there were reports that they were all brought together, given a new *songbun* classification and moved to a remote part of the country—just to guarantee that their knowledge of the Jasmine Revolution did not leak out to the general public. The North Korean secret police, the SSD, are not restricted from designing new *songbun* categories or classifications. One defecting SSD officer said, "We make as many *songbun* categories as we need."<sup>198</sup>

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families to remote areas," *Dong-a Ilbo*, March 22, 2011, <http://english.donga.com/srv/service.php3?bi code=050000&biid=2011032223288>

198 Author interview with former SSD officer, Mr. K.H. (alias).

## ***Songbun and Religion***

“In North Korea, you can get away with murder if you have good connections. However, if you get caught carrying a Bible, there is no way to save your life.”<sup>199</sup> It is in the North Korean regime's approach to religion that reveals *songbun* in its most terrifying manifestation. Every religious believer is regarded as being an enemy of the state, a hostile and impure element, an agent of the United States (if they are Christian), and a counter-revolutionary for whom only discrimination, punishment, isolation, and even execution are the proper forms of treatment by the regime.

Ironically, Pyongyang was referred to as the “Jerusalem of the East” prior to liberation from Japanese colonialism on 15 August 1945. According to the Korean Central News Agency's *Chosun Central Annual 1950*, at the time of liberation from Japan North Korea's total population was 9.16 million of whom two million, or 22.2%, were religious practitioners, including 1.5 million Cheondokyo followers, 375,000 Buddhists, 200,000 Protestants, and 57,000 Catholics.<sup>200</sup>

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199 Interviewee 27, as quoted in “A Prison Without Bars: Refugee and Defector Testimonies of Severe Violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief in North Korea,” (United States Commission On International Religious Freedom, 2008), 10.

200 Korean Central News Agency, *Chosun Central Annual 1950* (Pyongyang: Chosun Central News

Agency, 1950), 365, as quoted in Korea Institute of National Unification (KINU), *2010 White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea 2010* (Seoul, 2010), 323.

201 Yoon Yeo-sang, Han Sun-young, *2009 White Paper on Religious Freedom in North Korea* (Seoul: Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, 2009), 23.

202 *The Academy of Social Science* (Pyongyang: The Academy of Social Science Press, 1985), 450; as quoted in Korea Institute of National Unification, *2006 White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea* (Seoul, 2006), 135.

In that vein, North Korea has associated Christianity with influence by the United States and thus an inimical institution. At the start of the North Korean socialist revolution, during the Korean War and through 1958, Christians were persecuted more than other religions because they were

viewed as agents of Western imperialism. The 1950 version of the North Korean penal code stated that “those who force donations to religious organizations shall be punished by less than two years of imprisonment” and “those who are involved in administrative actions for religious organizations shall be punished by less than one year of edification labor work.”<sup>203</sup> Under the “Limited Use Policy” (liberation to 1953) and the “Suppression Policy” (1954–1958) Christians and their families were expelled from their homes, relocated, and often killed while their churches were destroyed.<sup>204</sup>

Consistent with these efforts, Kim Il-sung ordered the Party to eliminate religion through the following two steps:

**“First, thorough indoctrination so that ordinary religious followers would be made to abandon their beliefs and practices. Second, religious leaders who are found to be engaged in counter-revolutionary or anti-state activities must be punished in accordance with related laws. Among the details to implement this strategy was that those religious believers found incapable**

203 Kim tae-hwan, “North Korea: Is there freedom of religion?” Open Radio for North Korea, August 30, 2011. URL: <http://english.nkradio.org/>

204 Kim Yong-gu, “North Korean Residents’ *Songbun*,” 70-75.

**of being remade would be classified as the ‘targets of dictatorship.’”<sup>205</sup>**

Not only was there an effort to suppress religion from the outset of the socialist revolution, but there was a whole-scale effort to eliminate all religion and practitioners from North Korean society. Religious believers were classified and treated as one of the lowest groups on the *songbun* scale. In a 1962 speech to the Social Security Agency, predecessor to the SSD, Kim Il-sung stated, “...we cannot move onto becoming a communist society if we have those religious people. For that reason, we tried all religious leaders above deacons and executed them...lay people were put to labor when they changed their belief or were locked up in prison [and] when they did not...we executed all of them in 1958.”<sup>206</sup> At the time, those who were recognized by the regime as religious individuals numbered about 100,000 and, including families, totaled 450,000.<sup>207</sup> Their descendants have suffered ever since in prison camps (*kwan-li-so*) or restricted areas in heavy-labor jobs.

When the 51 *songbun* classifications were finalized, based on the Resident Registration Project of 1967–70, individual religious

205 Kang In-duk, “North Korea’s Policy on Religion,” *East Asian Review*, 7 (1995), 94-95.

206 2008 *White Paper* (KBA), 133.

207 *Ibid.*, 134.



groups were given their own category. Shamans, geomancers, and those of other minor beliefs were classified as category 29; Cheondoists (a native Korean religion) were classified as category 32; Protestants were classified as category 37; Buddhists were classified as category 38; and Catholics were classified as category 39.

Philo Kim, a renowned expert on religion in North Korea, states that most religious believers were eliminated from society as a result of the first major investigation into *songbun*, the Party's Intensive Guidance Project (see investigation section of this report). He explained that 900 pastors and 300,000 believers were killed or forced to renounce their faith. Additionally, 260 priests or monks or nuns and 50,000 Catholics were killed because they refused to renounce their faith. The same fate befell 35,000 Buddhist believers and 120,000 Chondoist followers. Professor Kim concludes that over 400,000 religious believers were persecuted and executed or sent to political prison camps.<sup>208</sup>

In recent years, after having virtually eliminated religion in society, the regime found it useful to establish a handful of churches and Buddhist temples that are controlled by local security agencies and the Party. No one is fooled by this subterfuge. The

<sup>208</sup> Philo Kim, "New Religious Policy and the Reality of Religious Freedom in North Korea," 84.

### Refugee Testimony on Discrimination Against Religion

*"There are many people who are sent to the SSD detention center for the crime of going to church. North Korean authorities render the heaviest punishment on these people, treating them like dogs. . . . Christians received more torture and punishment for their beliefs. The authorities would strike them with a stick while asking, "Does God give you food? Do you think God gives you food?"*

Defector quoted in National Human Rights Commission of Korea, "Survey on North Korean Human Rights Conditions – December 2008 (Seoul: University of North Korean Studies, 2008); 252.

sermons in these religious gatherings actually reinforce regime policies.

The U.S. Department of State's 2009 International Religious Freedom Report says that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea continues to persecute and even execute believers and preachers of Christianity.<sup>209</sup>

For the past fifteen years, numerous South Korean and international human rights NGOs<sup>210</sup> have documented the testimony

<sup>209</sup> U.S. Department of State, "2009 International Religious Freedom Report, Korea, Democratic People's Republic of," <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127274.htm>

<sup>210</sup> Among the more prominent, see: Yeo Sang Yoon and Sun Young Han, *2009 White Paper on Religious Freedom in North Korea* (Seoul: Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, 2009); "A Prison Without Bars: Refugee and Defector Testimonies of Severe Violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief in North Korea," (United States Commission On

of countless North Korean refugees who tell of underground believers trying to proselytize their faith and suffering horribly at the hands of the North Korean MPS and SSD agents and their prison guards and officials. According to a guard at a political prison camp who defected to South Korea, the North Korean authorities have continuously distributed special instructions, speeches, pamphlets, and textbooks stating that religion is a social evil.<sup>211</sup>

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International Religious Freedom, 2008); Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, *North Korea: A Black Hole for Religion* (2010); Christian Solidarity Worldwide, *North Korea: A Case to Answer, A Call to Act* (Surrey, UK: 2007); Korean Institute for National Unification, *2010 White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea*, (Seoul, 2010); Korea Bar Association (KBA), *2008 White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea*, (Seoul, 2009).

211 Christian Solidarity Worldwide, *North Korea: A Case to Answer, A Call to Act* (Surrey, UK: 2007), 64.

## ***Songbun* and Healthcare**

Article 12 of the ICESCR provides for "...the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health."

North Korean state officials insist that they have an excellent universal healthcare system that is free for everybody. However, the reality is that the medical system has virtually collapsed, at least for everyone but the North Korean elite. Amnesty International is just one of several sources of information on how widespread and chronic malnutrition is in North Korea. The lack of food has impacted the North Korean population's immune system to such an extent that the poor diet of the population in general has led to numerous outbreaks of illnesses. Hospitals and their staff are very poorly resourced causing people from most social classes to seek medicine in the black market.<sup>212</sup>

Nonetheless, for those able to receive healthcare, *songbun* has a direct impact on the quality of medical service one receives. North Korea maintains different levels of healthcare service for people depending on their status and background, as testified to by a North Korean

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212 Amnesty International, "The Crumbling State of Health Care in North Korea," (London: Amnesty International Publications, 2010), 2.

medical doctor who defected to the South. Dr. Park has stated that special treatment units exist for the treatment and care of Party officials and that there is unequal treatment between social classes.<sup>213</sup> In general, health services are inadequate for the wavering class, and extremely poor or non-existent for the hostile class. For the higher *songbun* classes, large hospitals are maintained with special units for the treatment of Party officials. In Pyongyang, the most modern medical clinics are available to the Party elite, such as the Bonghwa Hospital and Namsan Hospital that provide services only for the Party elite. No matter how much money those of the lower *songbun* classes have, they cannot obtain health care at these facilities. But even in local hospitals, party and security agency personnel get priority treatment over the local populace.<sup>214</sup> This *songbun*-based treatment ensures that those in the wavering class and, even more so, the hostile class get the worst medical care in the country outside the non-existent care inside the political prison camps.

One of the Kim regime's more egregious policies is the exclusion of disabled indi-

213 KINU, *2006 White Paper*, 92.

214 Kim Su-am, et al, *Bukhan Jumin-ui Salmui Jil: Siltae Wa Insik (Quality of North Korean Residents Lives: Situation and Understanding)* Korea Institute of National Unification (Seoul: Research Series 11-06), 2011; p138-140.

viduals from the city of Pyongyang. In 2003 North Korea adopted a law to promote equal access for disabled people to public services and claimed in its second report on compliance with the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights that its handicapped citizens are protected. However, its law has not been implemented and North Korean refugees in the South testify that the handicapped are severely discriminated against unless they are wounded soldiers who say their wounds were the result of American aggression in the Korean War.<sup>215</sup>

**Refugee Testimony on Class Discrimination in Marriage**

***“The SSD forced the couple to divorce. . . . At first they were imprisoned for smuggling and released for ill health. Their background is not good, so they were arrested again for economic or political offenses. . . . They were forced to divorce.”***

Testimony of a defector from North Hamgyong Province, as quoted in *White Paper on North Korean Human Rights 2010* (Seoul: Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, 2010); 416.

215 Testimony of refugee Lee XX during an interview at KINU, *2006 White Paper*, 106. See also U.S. Department of State, *2010 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Democratic People's Republic of Korea*, 2011.

## Songbun and Family

The effects of *songbun* are most insidious within familial relationships. Because of constant political indoctrination from the cradle to the grave and fear of punishment, parents feel pressured to ensure that their children understand the necessity of not complaining about their place in life or status of their well-being, lest the whole family suffer as a consequence.

### **Refugee Testimony on Discrimination Against Hostile Class in the Choice of Marriage**

*“I was born in Ryanggang Province, and my father was from South Korea. It was difficult for me to get married due to my family background. At the time, because it was so difficult just to make a living, Pyongyang men who received more food rations or border guards or national security agency officers were considered to be the most desirable bachelors. No one would marry me because my parents were from the South.”*

Testimony of Young-hui Park (female North Korean defector), *The Hardship and Human Trafficking of Women*, 6<sup>th</sup> International Conference for North Korean Human Rights and Refugees, Seoul, 2005, 162

In Kim's thoroughly politicized society, the most important qualifier for selection of a prospective spouse is *songbun*.<sup>216</sup> One's background determines whether another

seeks or accepts another in marriage.<sup>217</sup> Normally, a person with good *songbun* does not want to marry someone of a lesser *songbun*, because they and their children will be negatively affected by the association.

Party members, government officials, and military officers would never consider marrying a person with poor *songbun* or allowing their children to do so. Parents with good *songbun* inquire as to the *songbun* of their child's prospective spouse beforehand to prevent his or her marrying into a lower class. Essentially, marrying someone with poor *songbun* will likely exclude that individual from gaining membership in the Korean Workers' Party, thus causing severe consequences in one's employment and quality of life.

According to North Korea's Family Law, Article 9, a male may marry at the age of 18 and a woman at 17. However, because of military or economy-related labor commitments, the vast majority of North Koreans marry about 8-12 years after these ages. Six out of ten marriages are arranged through a matchmaker. The matchmaker naturally inquires about each suitor's *songbun* to seek a good match before making recommendations to

<sup>216</sup> Korea Institute of National Unification, 2009 Bukhan Gaeyo, 2009, 28.

<sup>217</sup> For a compelling story of how *songbun* impacts marriage, see the story of Jun-sang and Miran in Demick, *Nothing to Envy*.

parents. If one of the prospective marriage partners is a military officer or party official, the KWP organizes the marriage on strict *songbun* guidelines.<sup>218</sup>

However, parents have learned to see spousal preference in a different light over the last few years. Now the most important qualifier for marriage is employment in foreign currency-making enterprises, foreign trade companies, or other economic enterprises. Again, money and bribes have been changing the decision-making process in recent years.

Not even those with the highest *songbun* rating escape the tragedy of inability to marry lower levels. North Korean leader Kim Jong-il's niece, Chang Kum-song, was prevented from marrying a man of lower *songbun* because her mother, Kim Kyong-hui (Kim Jong-il's sister), and her father, Chang Song-taek, opposed the marriage on the basis of *songbun*. Consequently, while visiting Paris, Chang Kum-song committed suicide on 15 September 2006 by taking an overdose of sleeping pills.<sup>219</sup> Ironically, Kim Kyong-hui and Chang Song-

218 Naver Encyclopedia, s.v. "Marriage in North Korea," <http://100.naver.com/100.nhn?docid=718423>.

219 Ahn Jung-shik, "Pyongyang Report: Bukhan Kyeol-hon, 'Chulsin Songbun' Jungyo (Pyongyang Report: Marriage in North Korea, Family Background is Important)," SBS, 25 September 2006. <http://news.naver.com/main/read.nhn?mode=LPOD&mid=tvh&oid=055&aid=0000080544>

**Refugee Testimony on Discrimination Against Hostile Class in the Choice of Marriage**

*"The families of my mother were returnees from Japan, and relatives of my husband lived in the United States. Thus we had in common in terms of bad 'background.' In North Korea, everything was related to one's past. So, those who had politically-bad birth did not have any dream like marriage with the people who were born in communist leaders' families."*

Testimony of Seo Jeong-sim, as quoted in Joanna Hosaniak, "Prisoners of Their Own Country: North Korea in the Eyes of the Witnesses," Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights, 2004. p.63. URL: <http://eng.nkhumanrights.or.kr/main.htm>

taek had been subjected to the same treatment by Kim Il-sung decades earlier. Kim Il-sung refused to give his daughter permission to marry Chang based on his lower *songbun* status and sent Chang away to the east coast city of Wonsan. Kim Kyong-hui continued to make an issue of it until Kim Il-sung eventually relented and gave the two permission to marry.<sup>220</sup> Another famous story in North Korea is that of a KWP member's daughter who committed suicide by drinking farm chemicals, because she was not allowed to marry the son of a common laborer.<sup>221</sup>

220 Chong Kyong-il, "Chulsin Songbun-e Ddala Unmyeong-yi Dal-la Jineun Bukhan (In North Korea, Fate Is Determined By Songbun)," 11 February 2008, [http://cafe.naver.com/cogmldnjs.cafe?iframe\\_url=/ArticleRead.nhn%3Farticleid=70&](http://cafe.naver.com/cogmldnjs.cafe?iframe_url=/ArticleRead.nhn%3Farticleid=70&)

221 on, 'Chulsin Songbun' Jungyo (Pyongyang Report: Marriage in North Korea, Family Background

## VI. SONGBUN AND HUMAN RIGHTS

The *songbun* system of classification is by its very nature a violation of human rights. Grounded in inequality and discrimination, its purpose is to institutionalize one group's dominance over others and to ensure the Kim regime's control. The human rights abuses committed by the regime are not only executed through the *songbun* system but are also rationalized by it. In the Korean Workers' Party's official newspaper, the Rodong Sinmun, the Party historically publishes editorials justifying its actions, policies and positions, and explains its position on human rights relative to class structure, enemies of the state and friend vs. foe. "We don't hide our class structure in human rights any more than we hide our party loyalty. Socialist human rights are not supra-class human rights that give freedom and authority to hostile elements that oppose socialism and impure elements that bring harm to the people's benefit."<sup>222</sup>

Article 12 of the 2009 North Korean Consti-

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is Important)," SBS, 25 September 2006. <http://news.naver.com/main/read.nhn?mode=LPOD&mid=tvh&oid=055&aid=0000080544>

222 "Chamdaun Inkweoneul Onghohayeo (For the Protection of True Human Rights)," Rodong Sinmun (Workers' Daily), 24 June 1995; as quoted in Kim Soo-Am, *Conceptions of Democracy and Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea*, Ministry of National Unification, 2008. URL: [http://www.kinu.or.kr/eng/pub/pub\\_02\\_01.jsp?page=5&num=53&mode=view&field=&text=&order=&dir=&bid=DATA05&ses=](http://www.kinu.or.kr/eng/pub/pub_02_01.jsp?page=5&num=53&mode=view&field=&text=&order=&dir=&bid=DATA05&ses=)

tution states, "The state shall adhere to the class line and strengthen the dictatorship of the people's democracy, and thus firmly protect the people's sovereignty and socialist system from the maneuvers for destruction by hostile elements at home and abroad."<sup>223</sup> While North Korean diplomats defend the Kim regime's human rights record and deny the existence of *songbun*, their own party-state documents speak plainly of the *songbun* policy's intent.

*Songbun*'s impact on North Korean society is so extensive that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), often described as the "global expression of rights to which all human beings are inherently entitled,"<sup>224</sup> ironically reads as a listing of all the rights *songbun* denies to North Koreans. In a recent ROK Ministry of Unification survey where they were asked to identify the greatest abuse of human rights in North Korean society, North Korean refugees in the ROK answered: the famine (29.6%), public executions (22.6%), torture (19.1%), discrimination based in *songbun* (18.3%), lack of freedom of movement

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223 North Korean Constitution - April 2009. URL: <http://asiamatters.blogspot.com/2009/10/north-korean-constitution-april-2009.html>.

224 United Nations Country Team in Thailand Office, of the National Human Rights Commission, *Dignity and Justice for All of Us: Our Voices are Heard in Thailand*, (Thailand: Keen Media, 2008) p. 5, [http://www.un.or.th/documents/UND\\_UDHR\\_ENG\\_031208\\_V10\\_Final.pdf](http://www.un.or.th/documents/UND_UDHR_ENG_031208_V10_Final.pdf).

(6.1%), and lack of freedom to communicate (2.1%). However, among party members from that group, 66.7% insisted *songbun* was the greatest tool of abuse of North Korean human rights.<sup>225</sup> These statistics are consistent with the trend that the average North Korean, particularly among the young, is not aware of the impact that *songbun* has on their daily lives, whereas party members are aware of their dependence upon good *songbun* and a lifetime of demonstrated loyalty to the Kim family regime to receive the privileges and benefits of party membership.

The UDHR states in its first article that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." Article 2 provides that "everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind," including "political or other opinion," "national or social origin," and "birth or other status."<sup>226</sup> Article 7 specifically states that "all are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law."<sup>227</sup>

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225 Lee Kum-sun, Kim Su-am, "Pukhan Inkwon Chimhae Kujo mit Kaeson Chollyak (North Korean Human Rights Abuse and Strategies for Improvement) " Ministry of Unification (Seoul: Research Series 09-11, 2009), p.104.

226 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, GAR 217 (III) A, U.N. Doc. A/RES/217(III) (10 December 1948) [hereinafter UDHR], <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml> [emphasis added].

227 *Ibid.* [emphasis added].

The policy of *songbun*, deliberately designed to create political class differences and social inequality within North Korean society, is in direct contradiction to the Declaration's assertion that human beings are equal and have inherent rights without discrimination. The *songbun* system justifies privilege for political loyalty and restricts, even eliminates, the rights of political opponents. It is one of the major political tools (along with state terror, pervasive state surveillance, and state-controlled socio-economic resource allocation), by which the Kim regime controls society. The discrimination created by *songbun* ensures politically-directed denial of the right to make many of the decisions other countries assume to be a matter of individual prerogative—one's occupation, spouse, housing, education, and medical treatment.

## North Korea Believes It Can Define Human Rights As It Chooses

The North Korean regime's interpretation of human rights sharply departs from the international norms of human rights. While the North Korean regime in the 1970s defined human rights as "various political, economic, and social rights that people ought to enjoy," it also asserted in the state's Dictionary of Political Terms that, "A complete dictatorial policy for class enemies is a human right."<sup>228</sup> This latter statement demonstrates how the regime justifies separating out and suppressing those it perceives as class enemies, and how this became a governing principle of the Kim regime.

North Korea's 2009 Constitution also provides an interpretation of human rights at variance with international standards. On the one hand, the Constitution requires regime institutions to protect human rights norms. On the other hand, it proclaims that all institutions and people must "struggle actively against class enemies and all law offenders."<sup>229</sup> That the regime does

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228 Publishing Company of Social Sciences, "Jeongchi yong-eo sajeon (Dictionary of Political Terms)" (Pyongyang: Sahoegwahak Chulpansa, 1970), 718; as cited in Heo Man-ho, "North Korean Human Rights in Reform Policy: Searching for a Multilateral Approach," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, 20, no.1, (2008), 84.

229 Sin, "North Korean Constitution—April 2009." Also, p. 63 (analyzing North Korea's criminal code).

not see human rights in the same way as the rest of the world is also demonstrated by North Korea's report for the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the U.N. Human Rights Council. The report states that "the Constitution comprehensively provides for the fundamental rights and freedoms in all fields of State and public activity."<sup>230</sup> But it then says that the Constitution "also explicitly stipulates that these rights and freedoms are provided to everyone equally and practically, and shall be amplified with the consolidation and development of the socialist system."<sup>231</sup> In other words, enjoyment of human rights depends on the consolidation of the socialist system and can only flourish within that particular political context. As individuals adhere to the political objectives of the state they will attain additional rights; if they do not, they will be denied their rights.

New provisions in Article 8 of the 2009 Constitution seem to affirm the regime's commitment to human rights protections: "The state shall safeguard the interests of, and respect and protect the human rights of the working people, including workers, farmers, soldiers, and working intellectuals,

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230 DPRK National Report Submitted in Accordance with Paragraph 15(A) of the Annex to Human Rights Council Resolution 5/1, Human Rights Council, Working group on the Universal Periodic Review, Sixth Session, Geneva, 30 November-11 December 2009, A/HRC/WG.6/6/PRK/1, 27 August 2009, 4-5.

231 *Ibid.*

who have been freed from exploitation and oppression and have become the masters of the state and society."<sup>232</sup> Yet, in Article 12, the Constitution explains, "The state shall adhere to the class line and strengthen the dictatorship of the people's democracy, and thus firmly protect the people's sovereignty and socialist system from the maneuvers for destruction by hostile elements at home and abroad."<sup>233</sup> The inclusion of the phrase, "hostile elements at home," refers to those identified as such in the *songbun* system. By considering large portions of their citizenry "enemies," the North Korean state removes them from human rights protection.

Furthermore, the same Constitution requires citizens to follow "socialist norms of life" and to obey a "collective spirit." These provisions take precedence over individual political and civil liberties. It is the *songbun* system that identifies those hostile elements who, even at the time of their birth, are classified as "counter-revolutionaries," or "anti-state and impure elements" based on their family backgrounds.

Structurally and philosophically, the Kim regime has maintained a unique view of human rights and its application to the

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232 Sin, "North Korean Constitution—April 2009" <http://asiamatters.blogspot.com/2009/10/north-korean-constitution-april-2009.html> [emphasis added].

233 *Ibid.*

population of North Korea. In an interview with the *Washington Times* in the early 1990's, Kim Il-sung described his view of North Korean human rights as being "different from western-style human rights...and in line with the interests of the people."<sup>234</sup> According to the Korean Workers' Party's official newspaper *Rodong Shinmun*, "All nations on earth have different traditions and national characters, as well as different cultures and histories of social development. Therefore, human rights standards and their guarantees will have to vary depending on the concrete realities of each nation."<sup>235</sup> The Kim regime also defines its approach to human rights as "our-style human rights" serving "our-style socialism."<sup>236</sup> "Socialist human rights are not," the *Rodong Shinmun* emphasized in 1995, "...human rights that give freedom and authority to hostile elements that oppose socialism and [to] impure elements."<sup>237</sup>

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234 2008 *White Paper* (KBA), 171.

235 *Rodong Shinmun*, March 2, 2001, as referred to in 2009 *White Paper* (KINU), 35.

236 2008 *White Paper* (KBA), 34–35.

237 "Chamdaun Inkweoneul Onghohayeo (For the Protection of True Human Rights)," *Rodong Shinmun* (Workers' Daily), 24 June 1995; as quoted in Kim Soo-am, *Conceptions of Democracy and Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea*, Korea Institute of National Unification, 2008. URL: [http://www.kinu.or.kr/eng/pub/pub\\_02\\_01.jsp?page=5&num=53&mode=view&field=&text=&order=&dir=&bid=DATA05&ses=](http://www.kinu.or.kr/eng/pub/pub_02_01.jsp?page=5&num=53&mode=view&field=&text=&order=&dir=&bid=DATA05&ses=)

Yet North Korea also argues that its policies are consistent with advancing human rights—or at least the rights of those who are obedient to the regime. The DPRK's written response to the UPR stated, "the DPRK recognizes that human rights are not the rights to 'freedom irrespective of the State and Society' but they are the rights to 'freedom guaranteed by the State and society.'" From North Korea's standpoint, human rights are not inherent in individuals but granted by the state. If that point was not made clear enough, the DPRK argument continued, "as human rights are guaranteed by sovereign States, any attempt to interfere in others' internal affairs, overthrow the governments and change the systems on the pretext of human rights issues constitutes violations of human rights. In this sense, the DPRK holds that *human rights immediately mean national sovereignty*."<sup>238</sup>

North Korea finds it useful to accede to international human rights agreements based on its own definition of human rights. It has occasionally tried to present an image of cooperation with, and adherence to, international human rights norms. In 1981, it acceded to the International

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238 DPRK National Report Submitted in Accordance with Paragraph 15(A) of the Annex to Human Rights Council Resolution 5/1, Human Rights Council, Working group on the Universal Periodic Review, Sixth Session, Geneva, 30 November-11 December 2009, A/HRC/WG.6/6/PRK/1, 27 August 2009, 4.

Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) of 1966. It has filed two reports required by that Covenant, although the second was not delivered until the year 2000—12 years late. Its third report was due in 2004, but as of July 2011 North Korea had failed to submit it.<sup>239</sup>

In 1981, North Korea also acceded to the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) of 1966. In 1984, it acceded to the Convention on the Non-Applicability of Statutory Limitations to War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity of 1968; acceded in 1989 to the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide of 1948; in 1990 it ratified the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989 and in 2001, it acceded to the U.N. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women of 1979.<sup>240</sup>

Acceding to these agreements is not the same as adhering to them, and compliance is impossible to ascertain in North Korea due to the limitations imposed on access by foreigners. Because the regime suppresses information into and out of the country, the concept of *songbun* and its impact on the entire population has been

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239 Centre for Civil and Political Rights, "Overdue Reports," <http://www.ccprcentre.org/en/overdue-reports> [accessed 25 July 2011].

240 2008 *White Paper* (KBA), 75.

virtually unknown to most of the outside world. Restricted from any direct observation, first-hand experience is impossible for outsiders to attain. Those able to escape North Korea have begun to provide the world the facts concerning the *songbun* social stratification system and its impact on society as a whole.

From countless accounts of North Korean refugees, one must conclude that the operating ethos of the Kim regime and observance of human rights standards are incompatible. Alerted by this testimony, the international community, individual nation-states, and independent human rights organizations have raised concerns but are met with resistance from North Korea on grounds that human rights are an internal matter.

The U.N. Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities raised the issue of North Korea's human rights in August 1997 and again in 1998. The regime's notification to the U.N. Secretary-General of its intent to withdraw from the ICCPR in 1997 was made in protest against the resolution critical of the human rights situation in North Korea. As mentioned above, the U.N. Human Rights Committee, which is authorized to interpret ICCPR provisions, found that the ICCPR "did not have a temporary character typical of treaties where a

right of denunciation was deemed to be admitted."<sup>241</sup> Therefore, North Korea could not withdraw from it.

In its Second Periodic Report under the ICCPR in 2000, North Korea insisted that North Korean citizens are guaranteed all rights stipulated in the ICCPR, namely, equal rights "without discrimination on the basis of race, color, gender, language, religion, *political views*, national or social background, property, birth, or personal status."<sup>242</sup>

On November 19, 2003, the U.N. Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights reviewed North Korea's Second Periodic Report on the ICESCR and identified several points of concern, notably food distribution, medical discrimination, labor, employment, and lack of an independent judiciary. In response to the review, North Korean delegation head Ambassador Ri Tcheul insisted North Korea had no social class policy and that such claims were false.<sup>243</sup> The

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241 Amnesty International, Amnesty International Report 1998 - Korea (Democratic People's Republic of), 1 January 1998, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3ae6a9f3c.html> [accessed 9 June 2011].

242 2010 *White Paper* (KINU).

243 Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights, NKHR Briefing Report No. 1, "The Last Outposts Of Slavery Of The Past XX Century: Briefing Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Political Prison Camps in the DPRK" (2009), <http://eng.>

evidence presented in this report would demonstrate otherwise. Furthermore, in its 2009 report to the Human Rights Council Resolution 5/1, North Korean diplomats insisted that “the DPRK holds that human rights immediately mean national sovereignty.”<sup>244</sup> This is inconsistent with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the ICCPR, and the ICESCR.

U.N. resolutions have condemned a variety of violations of rights in North Korea, based on the provisions in the ICCPR and the ICESCR, both of which state that parties to these Covenants must guarantee human rights to all “without discrimination of any kind as to race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.”<sup>245</sup>

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[nkhumanrights.or.kr/board/bbs\\_list.php?board\\_table=bbs\\_report](http://nkhumanrights.or.kr/board/bbs_list.php?board_table=bbs_report); also see Committee On Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Thirty-first Session Summary Record of the 44th Meeting, Second periodic report of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, 2 December 2003, [www.unhchr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/0/.../annual%20report%202004%20ENG.DOC](http://www.unhchr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/0/.../annual%20report%202004%20ENG.DOC).

244 See Human Rights Council Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review, Sixth session, Geneva, 30 November-11 December 2009 National Report Submitted In Accordance With Paragraph 15 (A) Of The Annex To Human Rights Council Resolution 5/1, \* Democratic People's Republic of Korea (A/HRC/WG.6/6/PRK/1, 27 August 2009), Section 15. URL: <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G09/151/47/PDF/G0915147.pdf?OpenElement>.

245 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, art. 2(1), 999 U.N.T.S. 171, 16 December 1966, [hereinafter ICCPR], available at <http://www2.ohchr.org>

The U.N. General Assembly passed a resolution on human rights in North Korea for the first time in 2005 and has passed similar resolutions annually since. North Korea answers with accusations such as, “The hostile forces led by the US hatch this plot every year to bring down the DPRK's (North Korea's) system through pressure and conspiratorial means by labeling it a ‘human rights abuser’ ...”<sup>246</sup> North Korea's diplomatic representatives have consistently characterized international efforts to change human rights approaches in the North as being “aggressive” and “hostile.” North Korean officials also frequently assert that accusations of human rights abuses in their state reflect a United States-led conspiracy to interfere in North Korean internal affairs.<sup>247</sup>

Of course, the regime's view that international human rights values are anathema—and a direct threat—to its existence

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[org/english/law/ccpr.htm](http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/ccpr.htm); and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, art. 2(2), 993 U.N.T.S. 3, 16 December 1966, [hereinafter ICESCR], available at <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/cescr.htm> [emphasis added].

246 “N.Korea rejects U.N. human rights resolution as conspiracy,” *China Post*, November 20, 2010, <http://www.chinapost.com.tw/asia/korea/2010/11/20/280704/NKorea-rejects.htm>.

247 See Letter from the Permanent Representative of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to the U.N. Office at Geneva addressed to the President of the Human Rights Council, GA A/HRC/16/G/2, 20 January 2011, [http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage\\_e.aspx?c=50&su=59](http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?c=50&su=59).

as a cohesive political structure may well be true if there is little genuine support for the regime among its people. Freeing people from oppression is a core principle of human rights.

Nevertheless, North Korea participated with a high-level delegation in the Universal Periodic Review of its human rights record at the Human Rights Council in 2009. It rejected most recommendations made by other governments during the review but not all of them. But it has not clarified which recommendations it might accept, so by now it is assumed the regime has rejected them all, although it said it would examine recommendations to ensure the rights of children—including the right to development without discrimination.<sup>248</sup>

To date, U.N. agencies have not specifically focused on the *songbun* system as a source of human rights violations. However, questions were raised in the ICESCR and in the UPR about equality in society. North Korea, in response, denied that it engaged in “classifying people into categories and practicing discrimination,” and reiterated that its Constitution “guaranteed equal rights for all people.”<sup>249</sup> It also denied, and refused to examine the

recommendation to end “discrimination in the governmental food distribution.”<sup>250</sup>

North Korea's *songbun* policy, as it has been practiced over 60 years, has played a major role in determining the main victims of the human rights violations that are of concern to the U.N. General Assembly. Its state-published Political Dictionary states, “human rights are to be enforced through dictatorship against the class enemy.” The *songbun* system has made the identity of these “class enemies” clear.

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248 Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review, GA A/HRC/13/13, 4 January 2010, at paras. 90.56–57.

249 *Ibid.* at para. 44.

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250 *Ibid.* at para. 91.13.

## ***Songbun* is the Basic Concept Underlying All of North Korea's Human Rights Violations**

The fundamental principle of international human rights law is non-discrimination: that all people are "born free and equal in dignity and rights," and that everyone is entitled to all of the rights "without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status."<sup>251</sup> North Korea is obligated to adhere to the standards of international law set forth in the treaties it has ratified and in the principles of customary international law that all countries must observe. Customary international law arises from a general and consistent practice by all states.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), mentioned above, is a primary source of customary law. It provides, "a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations," and "a common understanding of the peoples of the world concerning the inalienable and inviolable rights of all members of the human family."<sup>252</sup> The International

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251 UDHR, Articles. 1 & 2; ICCPR art. 2(1); and ICESCR art. 2(2).

252 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, GAR 217 (III) A, U.N. Doc. A/RES/217(III), Dec. 10, 1948, [hereinafter UDHR], <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml>.

Conference on Human Rights held in Tehran in 1968 affirmed that the UDHR "constitutes an obligation for the members of the international community."<sup>253</sup>

North Korea is party to both the ICCPR and ICESCR, which combine with the UDHR to form the International Bill of Human Rights.<sup>254</sup> As a party to these treaties and under principles of customary international law, North Korea is obligated to ensure that its people enjoy all the rights contained in these documents regardless of their social or political belief.<sup>255</sup> Accordingly, any political, religious, social or birth-related discrimination that results in denying these rights to North Korean citizens is a violation of North Korea's international obligations and the fundamental principles of international human rights law.

The UDHR states that all people have the right to life and liberty, freedom from slavery or servitude, and freedom from "torture or...cruel, inhuman or degrading

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253 United Nations, "Final Act of the International Conference on Human Rights, Tehran," 13 May 1968, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3ae6b36f1b.html>.

254 "International Law," Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, [accessed 30 June 2011], <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/>.

255 UDHR art. 2; ICCPR art. 2(1); and ICESCR art. 2(2).

treatment or punishment."<sup>256</sup> North Korea's detention of its citizens based solely on their *songbun* classification violates these basic human rights.<sup>257</sup> As noted previously, many North Koreans are sent to political prison camps for being (or having ancestors who were) class enemies—landowners, collaborators with the Japanese, capitalists, religious leaders, or family members of someone who escaped to South Korea.<sup>258</sup> North Korea forces these victims to perform strenuous and hazardous labor in the camps without adequate rest, food, or medical care.<sup>259</sup> "These camps are notorious for abysmal living conditions and abuse, including...lack of proper housing and clothes, mistreatment and torture by guards..."<sup>260</sup> Each instance of imprisonment and execution in the prison camps is a violation of the victim's fundamental right to life, liberty, and the right to be free from servitude or inhumane treatment.

256 UDRH arts. 3–5.

257 [P. 46] (describing how the *songbun* system is used to send people to the prison camps).

258 [P. 45].

259 "Annual Report: North Korea 2011," Amnesty International, 28 May 2011, <http://www.amnestyusa.org/research/reports/annual-report-north-korea-2011?page=show>; and David Hawk, *The Hidden Gulag Second Edition: The Lives and Voices of "Those Who Are Sent to the Mountains."*

260 "World Report 2011: North Korea," Human Rights Watch, [accessed 30 June 2011], <http://www.hrw.org/en/world-report-2011/north-korea>.

Although the UDHR and the ICCPR declare that everyone has the right to "liberty of movement and freedom to choose [one's] residence,"<sup>261</sup> those assigned specific *songbun* levels are often forcibly relocated to isolated areas.<sup>262</sup> The forced relocations also violate North Koreans' right to freely move and choose their residence. Those with lower *songbun* rankings are prohibited from living in, or even visiting, Pyongyang and fertile areas of the countryside.<sup>263</sup> Their geographical separation from those of higher rank in the capital is meant to establish and maintain the dominance of the privileged class, which creates a form of political *apartheid* that pervades every aspect of life.

Article 14 of the ICCPR states that, "[a]ll persons shall be equal before the court."<sup>264</sup> However, North Korea relies on *songbun* categorization to determine guilt or innocence in their criminal justice system, which violates the basic human rights of equality and justice. Criminal defendants in North Korea are treated differently

261 ICCPR art. 12(1) and UDHR, art. 13(1).

262 [P. 14-16] (describing the history of *sonbun* investigations and relocations of families).

263 Demick, p. 27 (describing the story of Tae-woo who was assigned a lower ranking because he was a former South Korean soldier, and thereby restricted where he could travel or live).

264 *Ibid.*, art. 14(1).

depending on their *songbun* ranking.<sup>265</sup> Those with higher levels are shown leniency and given lighter sentences. Even North Korea's Constitution, as noted above, proclaims that all institutions and people must "struggle actively against class enemies and all law offenders."<sup>266</sup> North Korea's use of birth and social class to create inequalities in the criminal justice system is another clear violation of the fundamental human right to equal treatment for all people regardless of "race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status."<sup>267</sup>

The *songbun* system also violates the right to education, to free choice of employment, and to an adequate standard of living. The ICESCR stipulates that higher education must be equally accessible to all people and that all people have the right to freely choose their employment and to have equal access to promotion in that employment.<sup>268</sup> It also protects the right to adequate food, housing and clothing—including the right to equitable distribution of these supplies to those in

need.<sup>269</sup> However, in North Korea, access to higher education is determined by one's *songbun* level.<sup>270</sup> Furthermore, as illustrated in previous chapters, the *songbun* system is used to restrict access to employment and food. These restrictions use classifications based on birth, religion or political ideas to arbitrarily deprive North Korean citizens of their basic rights to education, choice of employment, and an adequate standard of living.

The *songbun* system unlawfully interferes with the family unit. International human rights law stipulates that, "[t]he family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society" and "[t]he widest possible protection and assistance should be accorded to the family."<sup>271</sup> These protections include the right to freely marry.<sup>272</sup> The *songbun* system limits people's right to freely enter marriages because contrary to the will of the parties involved, people with higher *songbun* levels are often prevented from marrying potential spouses from a lower *songbun* class.<sup>273</sup> Even more egregiously,

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265 p. [45–50] (describing the impact of *songbun* on the North Korean criminal justice system).

266 Sin, "North Korean Constitution—April 2009." Also, p. 63 (analyzing North Korea's criminal code).

267 UDRH arts. 1 & 2; ICCPR art. 2(1); and ICESCR art. 2(2)

268 UDRH art. 23(1) and ICESCR art. 7(c).

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269 ICESCR art. 11.

270 p. [71–75] (discussing how educational opportunity is directly linked to *songbun* level and family background).

271 UDRH art. 12(3) and ICESCR art. 10(1).

272 UDRH art 16(2); ICCPR art. 23; and ICESCR art. 10(1).

273 p. [84–85] (describing the effect of *songbun* on the family).

North Korean authorities have broken up families and forced parents to divorce because of one family member's undesirable background.<sup>274</sup> These intrusions into North Korean citizens' private lives violate fundamental international human rights and irreparably damage families, which are the "natural and fundamental group unit of society."<sup>275</sup>

North Korea also agreed to provide special protection to children. Specifically, they promised to "take all appropriate measures to ensure that the child is protected against all forms of discrimination or punishment on the basis of the status, activities, expressed opinions, or beliefs of the child's parents, legal guardians, or family members."<sup>276</sup> North Korea fundamentally contradicts this obligation by using the *songbun* system to mark a child for life with a classification based on his or her parents' and other family members' status, activities, expressed opinions, or beliefs. Children with poor

*songbun* face a lifetime of discrimination as they encounter limited opportunities and harsher treatment by the regime.

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."<sup>277</sup> The ICCPR carries a similar provision.<sup>278</sup> Yet the North Korean authorities have done everything in their power to not only persecute observers of religion, but to eradicate religion as an influence on North Korean society, usually through terror and force, and frequently through torture and even execution of religious leaders and individual believers alike.

The Kim regime's elimination of religious individuals from North Korean society was a detailed process that focused on ideological indoctrination to eliminate, or "convert" Christians to an atheistic belief in socialist ideology, imprison them if such conversion did not take hold, and execute religious leaders or those who attempted to convert others to their reli-

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274 The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, *Failure to Protect: A Call for the U.N. Security Council to Act in North Korea*, (Washington, D.C.: Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2006) 43 (describing the forced dissolution of a family after a grandfather was arrested for an unspecified crime, but the mother was spared punishment because of her family's "heroic" background).

275 ICESCR art. 10(1).

276 Convention on the Rights of the Child, GAR 44/25, 2 September 1990, art. 2(2), available at <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm>.

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277 UDRH art. 18.

278 ICCPR, art. 18(1).

gion.<sup>279</sup> The *songbun* system has placed religious believers among the most disadvantaged class.

## VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

### **The World Needs to Know About *Songbun***

International focus has been brought to bear on North Korea's many abuses of human rights arising from political prison camps, food insecurity, public executions, abductions and brutal treatment of women and children. But seldom are the institutional mechanisms of the Kim regime's discriminatory approach addressed. Largely because it has heretofore been hidden from view, *songbun* has not received the international attention it should elicit. Yet the institution of *songbun* underlies most of the human rights abuses the regime commits. It is the hidden institution that facilitates widespread and systematic discrimination on a national scale.

U.N. reports and resolutions have not yet addressed the impact of the *songbun* system on human rights. A recent U.N. resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea on March 18, 2011 addresses a range of human rights abuses but does not mention *songbun*.<sup>280</sup> Recent General

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279 Kang In-duk, "Policy on Religion," 95.

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280 United Nations GAR 65/225, [on the report of the Third Committee (A/65/456/Add.3)], "Situation of Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea," 18 March 2011, <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N10/526/04/PDF/>

Assembly resolutions on North Korea do not do that either.<sup>281</sup> While the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in North Korea and the U.N. Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights have mentioned North Korea's discriminatory practices, they do not call for the elimination of those practices in the same manner that the U.N. called for the elimination of *apartheid*—the racially motivated discrimination system that governed South Africa for decades and came to be recognized as a crime against humanity.

Yet the *songbun* policy has placed every North Korean citizen into one of 51 categories<sup>282</sup> and enabled the Kim regime to prioritize or de-prioritize all social welfare, occupations, housing and food programs according to the person's assigned category. The Classification Project for Division of Populace into 3 Classes and 51 Categories of 1967 to 1970 has served as the foundation of a state discrimination system so pervasive that it recalls the *apartheid* system of state-directed racial discrimination in which disfavored groups were denied participation in the political, social, economic, and cultural life of South

Africa, systematically persecute separated into reserves and prevented from expressing their opposition. Moreover, the *songbun* policy has been carried out by one of history's most efficient internal security networks. It is hardly surprising that those who cannot find enough to eat because of the failure of the economy and Public Distribution System are from the lower *songbun* classes who live in remote provinces. Of all North Korean policies, perhaps none violate the intent of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the ICCPR, or the ICESCR with such harsh and overwhelming impact as *songbun*.

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281 U.N. General Assembly, 65th Session, "Situation of Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea", (A/RES/65/225), 18 March 2011.

282 The number varies according to changes in the society.

## How North Korea Could Change Its *Songbun* Policies

Through aggressive actions, both through unilateral diplomacy and international community actions mainly through the United Nations, the world has made it clear to North Korea that it must change its human rights policies to come in line with those reflected in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In response, the Kim regime has deeply resisted such actions. In the assessment of the Republic of Korea's leading government think tank on North Korea, the Korea Institute for National Unification, North Korea's strategy in dealing with international demands for change in its approach to human rights has been "a multi-layered, complex interaction of denial and rejection, admission within rejection, counter-offensives, limited cooperation, and selective cooperation."<sup>283</sup> However, should somehow the Kim regime feel compelled to change its *songbun* policies, how should we assess the decision would be made, how would the new policy be implemented, and what would the consequences be?<sup>284</sup>

283 Kim Soo-am, "Gukjae sahoi-ui Inkwon Gaeip kwa bukhan-ui Inkwon Jeongchaek Gyeol-jeong Yo-so Bunseok (Analysis of the International Society's Human Rights Intervention and North Korea's Human Rights Policy Decision Criteria), Studies of International Affairs (Korea Institute for National Unification; Vol. 11, No.3, Autumn 2011).

284 Discussion based on discussions with ranking Korean Workers' Party members who now reside in

The process would not be much different from any other political dictatorship system with unique social, political, economic and institutional characteristics—filled with personal danger for anyone who proposed such a change and resisted by personnel and institutions that stand to lose the most. The very institutions that stand to lose the most—the party, the military, the security agencies, and the power elite—are those agencies that use the system to gain the most.

Based on internal and external developments, a person with power and influence could make a recommendation on changing the *songbun* policy to the Supreme Leader, Kim Jong-un, and the handful of senior leaders capable of implementing such change. In the Kim regime political system, this means that only senior Kim family members and high-ranking party members at the secretary level could do so without fear (or at least limited fear) of the potential threatening backlash such a proposal would inherently bring. It is not as if regime leaders do not hear of international demands for changes to its human rights policies. But the changes that have been made have to-date been cosmetic in terms of changing terminology of official documents or the regime's being less public with its human rights violations. Though the Party

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the Republic of Korea.

Central Committee represents the most powerful individuals in the Kim regime (124 members, 105 candidate members<sup>285</sup>), the vast majority of these individuals are not in a sufficiently “bullet-proof” position to make such a recommendation on such a drastic change to the North’s socio-political-economic system. Past implementation of major reforms with less than successful results have led to the deaths of those responsible, either directly or as a scapegoat.<sup>286</sup>

If a *songbun* reform policy were approved, experts on the subject would have to draft the policy. In this case, since it is a Party policy, the Organization and Guidance Department (the Party’s most influential organization, manned by only those of the highest *songbun*) would undoubtedly be the drafter of the new policy. Even if a draft policy were forwarded for approval,

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285 2011 Bukhan Gigwan Danchae-Byeol Inmyeong-jip (2011 North Korean Agency-Organization Personnel Register), Republic of Korea Ministry of Unification, 2011; p.13-14. Based on results of 3rd Party Delegates Conference of September 28, 2010.

286 For example, see Tania Branigan, “North Korean Finance Chief Executed For Botched Currency Reform,” The Guardian, March 18, 2010. URL: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/mar/18/north-korean-executed-currency-reform>. Pak Nam-gi, head of the ruling Party’s Finance Planning Division, was held responsible for causing economic chaos within months of the disastrous 2009 currency reform policy implementation, for which the Kim regime took the unique step of apologizing. Pak was executed in March 2010 by firing squad. Pak had been a member of the Party Central Committee since 1984.

there is no guarantee that it would be approved for implementation because of the fear mentioned earlier. The *songbun* policy is a prime enabler of regime security and a decisive provider of critical labor inputs, and thus its reform may endanger the regime’s survival. But even if approved, as in any political system, there would be resistance and limitations of implementation. For instance, even if those from the hostile class were allowed to become officers in the military, defense security officials would be highly unlikely to approve their assignments to the front lines, elite security and special forces, or political commissar assignments, and would predictably limit their duty to the rear areas. Those of hostile-class *songbun* allowed to become organizational cadre would likely be isolated to the least influential positions available. However, becoming party members would likely not happen, and if it did through bribes or other influence, it would probably be to the lowest party positions available. But, as emphasized by interviewees, policy counter-proposals would seek to limit changes in the *songbun* policy (if not cancel those changes altogether) and those offering counter-proposals would seek to discredit those presenting *songbun* policy reform by any means possible.<sup>287</sup>

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287 In one such famous case known as the Simhwajo Incident, Kim Jong-il’s brother-in-law, Chang Song-taek discredited the powerful OGD vice director Mun Song-sul in the late 1990’s to cast blame on

Such developments in and of themselves would reflect improvement indeed within the North Korean political system. However, even if implemented, any changes to current *songbun* policy and practice may take years if not decades of successful implementation to garner significant human rights gains. Perhaps the greatest threat to the Kim regime system would be “open employment.”<sup>288</sup> Such employment has never existed within the state-controlled economy in North Korea. If it were ever introduced, it could become a deadly virus attacking the Kim regime’s socio-political system. Such a system where anybody could compete for any position (or almost any position) regardless of *songbun* would be threatening to the entire core class and power elite and would seriously upset the North’s political hierarchy. Such developments should certainly be the goal of international community efforts to change the North’s *songbun* policy but their potential effects are likely already understood and feared by the power elite. Changing North Korea’s *songbun* system will require long-term persistence by the international human rights movement, enough that would compel leaders to risk their positions within the power system.

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him for being responsible for one of the most famous party disloyalty cases in North Korean history, only to find out later such was not the case.

288 In the minds of those interviewed, this is the most threatening development possible in North Korea today.

## **What the World Needs To Do About *Songbun***

Recognition that *songbun* lies at the core of North Korea’s consistent and widespread human rights violations is long overdue. Governments, the United Nations and non-governmental organizations should begin to sharpen their focus on North Korea’s primary tool for oppression and abuse and insist upon elimination of this practice with the same intensity and purpose with which the U.N. pursued international action to eliminate *apartheid* in South Africa.

Given the regime’s vested interest in the discrimination *songbun* facilitates, and the regime’s general intransigence in the face of international pressure, an international campaign to end *songbun* will not be easy or quick. But its objectives should be enumerated. Specifically, the international community must bring pressure against North Korea to achieve the following changes:

- 1. Allow the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Special Rapporteur full, free, and unimpeded access to North Korea, so that they can look into the human rights situation, including the *songbun* system.**

**2. Recognize that the *songbun* system is a serious violation of the most fundamental human rights as set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the ICCPR, the CRC, the ICESCR and other human rights instruments to which North Korea has acceded.**

**3. Eliminate *songbun*'s use to determine the type of occupation, food distribution, medical treatment, and levels of housing and education provided to certain classes of North Korean citizens.**

**4. Eliminate domestic travel restrictions associated with *songbun* classification; particularly those restricting the wavering and hostile classes from travel inside the country and abroad, and enable citizens to freely move to the capital city of Pyongyang and not be relocated to, confined to, or detained in remote geographic areas on the basis of their *songbun*.**

**5. Eliminate consideration of *songbun* by the judiciary, prosecutors, and police personnel in judgments and in determining terms of punishments for those convicted of crimes.**

**6. Enable humanitarian assistance to reach those who are most in need because of their poor *songbun* classification.**

**7. Open colleges and universities to entry by merit so that those denied educational advantages by the *songbun* stratification system can now receive them.**

**8. Work with the International Labor Organization to ensure that *songbun* is not used to determine occupational assignments.**

The U.N. Human Rights Council should specifically request the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in the DPRK to study the impact of the *songbun* system on the human rights of North Korea's citizens (including the provision of housing, medical treatment, food allocation, military service, and educational opportunity.) The Council should then add to its resolutions on North Korea special sections on how to end the pervasive discrimination caused by the *songbun* system.

The General Assembly should follow the Council's and the Special Rapporteur's work on this issue, address the *songbun* system in its annual resolution on human rights in North Korea, and call upon the Office of the High Commis-

sioner for Human Rights to look into how the United Nations might undertake a special campaign to eradicate such institutionalized discrimination. These can be modeled on the measures taken with regard to the *apartheid* system. The Assembly should demand that the practice of *songbun* be eliminated.

Governments and non-governmental organizations should bring to the attention of the members of the Human Rights Committee, which oversees implementation of the ICCPR, information about the *songbun* system and demonstrate that North Korea by means of this system is consistently violating the ICCPR. The recommendations of the Committee may exert some pressure on North Korea, or at least raise awareness of the deleterious effects of the *songbun* system by requiring North Korea to report on this system of institutionalized discrimination. To date, the Committee has not specifically mentioned *songbun* or asked North Korea to provide information about it.<sup>289</sup> Since

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289 The report focused primarily on issues such as the independence of the judiciary, severe abuses carried out by law enforcement officers (including torture, and inhuman and degrading treatment of prisoners), forced labor, restricted movement within North Korea, and restricted rights of assembly. See Concluding Observations of the Human Rights Committee: Democratic People's Republic of Korea, U.N. Human Rights Committee, 72nd Sess., paras. 8–25, U.N. Doc. CCPR/CO/72/PRK (2001), [http://www.unhchr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/\(Symbol\)/CCPR.CO.72.PRK.En?Opendocument](http://www.unhchr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/(Symbol)/CCPR.CO.72.PRK.En?Opendocument).

North Korea owes a new report to the Committee (it was due January 1, 2004), it is timely to bring the issue to the attention of the Committee.<sup>290</sup>

In any discussions that take place with North Korea on human rights or humanitarian issues, either at the multilateral or bilateral level, the *songbun* system should be made a part of the discussions. Not only is the issue primarily a human rights one, but it is critical to humanitarian decisions as well. Food aid, for example, will only reach the most vulnerable in the poorest parts of the country if the impact of the *songbun* classification system on food distribution is addressed.

There are many non-governmental and inter-governmental organizations that have taken on the task of monitoring discrimination and alerting the international community to such injustices. Among these organizations are: Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, The International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism, The International Federation for Human Rights, and The Anti-Caste Discrimination Alliance. In September 2011, over 40 such organizations, including the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, formed the International Coalition to Stop Crime Against Humanity in North Korea (ICNHK). These

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290 *Ibid.*, para. 30.

organizations should take note of the horrific abuses and discrimination of the *songbun* system, and launch an international campaign to stop this class-based system of oppression. These organizations should work to increase awareness of *songbun* abuses, present information about the system to the Human Rights Council and Human Rights Committee, and call upon the United Nations to investigate this discriminatory system.

Much of the problem with Western calls for improvements in North Korean human rights is the lack of recognition that *songbun* lies at the core of North Korea's human rights violations. An expanded recognition of this by international human rights organizations and demands for the end of North Korea's use of the *songbun* policy may well lead to specific international sanction strategies to compel the Kim regime to end this discriminatory practice much as South Africa was compelled to end *apartheid*.

## APPENDIX A:

### *Songbun* Background Investigation Projects<sup>291</sup>

Project	Period	Description
KWP Intensive Guidance Project	December 1958 – December 1960	Exposing, punishing and forcing relocation of impure elements to remote mountain villages
Resident Registration Project (RRP)	April 1966 – March 1967	Classification based on family background to arm a million-man army (investigate 3 direct generations and all relatives of the wife and mother who are separated up to the 6th degree of relationship)
Classification Project for Division of Populace into 3 Classes and 51 Sub-categories	April 1967 – June 1970	Based on the re-registration project, the entire population is divided into the Core Class, Wavering Class and Hostile Class, and then further divided into 51 sub-categories
Resident Investigation Project (RIP)	February 1972 – 1974	Investigate and determine the inclinations of the people based on discussions concerning North-South relations and then classify people based on those who can be believed, those whose beliefs are somewhat dubious, and those believed to be anti-state
Citizen Identification Card Inspection Project	January 1980 – December 1980	To expose impure elements, increase control, and inspect and renew citizen identification cards according to Kim Jong-il's orders

<sup>291</sup> Republic of Korea Ministry of Unification, "Pukhan Gaeyo 2009 (North Korea 2009)," (Seoul: Ministry of Unification, 2009), 322.

Project	Period	Description
Project concerning repatriated Koreans and defectors from South Korea	April 1980 – October 1980	Classify repatriated Koreans who entered North Korea including those who defected to North Korea into an additional 13 sub-categories and update related surveillance projects
Project concerning Koreans repatriated from Japan to North Korea	January 1981 – April 1981	Collect details of the data on former Korean residents in Japan who repatriated to North Korea and modernize surveillance data
Citizen Identification Card Renewal Project	November 1983 – March 1984	Renewal of citizen identification cards and update songbun dossier for all residents
Resident Reinvestigation Project	October 1989 – December 1990 (*in some sources this date is March 1984 – October 1989)	Review and re-index resident registration; develop background data on separated families (those families separated between North and South Korea during the Korean War)
Adoption of the Citizen Registration Law	November 1997	Birth Certificate, Citizenship Certificate, Pyongyang Citizen Card Issuance
Renewing Citizenship Cards	February 1998 – October 1998	Change passport style to credit card style.
Citizenship Card Exchange	April 2004	Change of Citizenship Card from Vinyl-coating style to a Notebook-style

## APPENDIX B:

### Tables Showing *Songbun* Categories

Number	<i>Songbun</i> Category	<i>Songbun</i> Category Description	Party Policy
1	Laborer	(Basic background) Peasants, hired agricultural workers and laborers whose positions were unchanged before and after liberation and whose social <i>songbun</i> was laborer	Core class
2	Hired agricultural workers	Those who came from historically peasant families	Core class
3	Poor farmers	Those who made their livelihood by farming their own land with at least 50% mixed crops	Core class
4	White collar workers	Those who worked in the Party, government, administration, economic, cultural, or education field after liberation	Core class
5	Those who were intellectuals after liberation	Those who received a high school education in North Korea or other communist countries after liberation	Those educated overseas and under surveillance but remained part of core class

Number	Songbun Category	Songbun Category Description	Party Policy
6	Revolutionaries' Families	Families of those who were sacrificed in the anti-Japanese struggle	-Treated as core class  -Appointed to party, government, military positions  -Those unable to further serve given maximum social security benefits
7	Families of Patriots	Families of non-combatant patriots killed in the Korean War	-Treated as core class  -Appointed to party, government, military positions  -Those unable to further serve given maximum social security benefits
8	Families of Korean War dead	Those who died in the Korean War	Core class
9	Families of soldiers killed in Korean War	Families of soldiers killed in Korean War	Core class
10	Rear area families	Families of active duty soldiers	Core class
11	Honored soldiers	Those who served in the Korean War	Core class

Number	Songbun Category	Songbun Category Description	Party Policy
12	Post-liberation laborers	During the socialist revolution process after liberation, those who became laborers but were formerly middle/small merchants, industrialists, intellectuals, or rich farmers	Past <i>songbun</i> background and current activities require surveillance and supervision
13	Rich farmers	-Farmers who hire one or more agricultural workers  -Farmers who hire workers for the planting/harvesting season	Must consider as resistance elements due to strong indications and subject to surveillance
14	National capitalists	Merchants who were national capitalists	Classified as resistance elements and subject to general surveillance
15	Landlords	-At the time of land reform in 1946, those who had 5 Jeongbo of land or more confiscated  -Those who cultivated up to 3 jeongbo of land	Subject to special surveillance
16	Pro-Japan and pro-U.S. individuals	Those who carried out pro-Japan or pro-U.S. activities	Subject to strict surveillance
17	Reactionary elements	Those who served the Japanese during the Japanese colonial period	Subject to strict surveillance
18	Those from the South (first category)	Families of rich farmers, landlords, national capitalists, pro-Japanese, pro-U.S., or reactionaries who came north during the Korean War	

Number	<i>Songbun</i> Category	<i>Songbun</i> Category Description	Party Policy
19	Those from the South (second category)	Laborers and farmers who committed crimes and then came north during the Korean War	Subject to general surveillance
20	Those expelled from party	Failed to carry out party mission and therefore expelled from party	Special surveillance based on reason for removal from Party
21	Those fired from their jobs	Cadre who were fired from positions after appointment	Problem data recorded in their files
22	Those who worked for the enemy	Those who surrendered who worked for the ROK-side police, security units or government during ROK occupation of the north during Korean War	Treated in same manner as those removed from the Party
23	Families of those arrested or jailed	Families of those sentenced to jail time	Treated in same manner as those removed from the Party
24	Spies	Those arrested as infiltrators or spies or associated with either	Treated in same manner as those removed from the Party
25	Anti-party, anti-revolution factionalists	-Those from the South Korean Labor Party in 1957 -Others purged for anti-Kim Il-sung actions	Treated in same manner as those removed from the Party
26	Families of those executed	Families of those who were executed for anti-party activity after the Korean War	Treated in same manner as those removed from the Party
27	Those released from prison for political crimes	Those released from prison after serving sentence or for political crimes	Treated in same manner as those removed from the Party

Number	Songbun Category	Songbun Category Description	Party Policy
28	Those who are lazy	Those who are lazy all of their life and causing trouble	General surveillance based on defining them as capable of being anti-revolutionaries during crisis
29	Hostesses	Shamans, fortunetellers, prostitutes, hostesses	General surveillance based on defining them as capable of being anti-revolutionaries during crisis
30	Those guilty of economic crimes	Those who serve jail time for theft, armed robbery, embezzlement	General surveillance based on defining them as capable of being anti-revolutionaries during crisis
31	Members of the Democratic Party	Families of those who were active in the Korea Socialist Democratic Party	Special surveillance based on position in Democratic Party
32	Chondo religion, Chongu Party members	Former believers of Chondo religion or the Chongu Party	Special surveillance based on position in Democratic Party
33	Koreans repatriated from China	Those returning from Northeast Asia after 1957	Other than Party members, returnees should be subject to surveillance
34	Koreans repatriated from Japan	Repatriated Koreans who formerly lived in Japan	Chosen Soren cadre join the Party and the rest placed under surveillance

Number	<i>Songbun</i> Category	<i>Songbun</i> Category Description	Party Policy
35	Those who enter North Korea	Those who enter North Korea after liberation	Strict surveillance of those who enter North Korea after liberation, but not those who enter after liberation
36	Intelligentsia educated before liberation	Those who graduated from high school during Japanese colonial period	Part of this group subject to surveillance
37	Protestant Christians	Protestant believer at the end of the Korean War	Special surveillance
38	Buddhists	Buddhist believer at the end of the Korean War	Special surveillance
39	Catholic Christians	Catholic believer at the end of the Korean War	Special surveillance
40	Out-of-area student or well-known person	Those who studied overseas or out-of-area or were famous locally	General surveillance
41	Independent farmer	Farmer who makes his livelihood on his own land	Treated as wavering class and ideologically indoctrinated
42	Small businessman	Does not have own facilities but moves from location to location	Ideologically indoctrinated
43	Mid-level businessman	Merchant who owned his own residence and shop	Treated as wavering class and convinced to change ideologically
44	Artisans	Those who made their own products	Ideologically indoctrinated
45	Small factory owners	Those who owned their own small factory	General surveillance

Number	Songbun Category	Songbun Category Description	Party Policy
46	Medium service traders	Owned their own facilities and buildings and hired employees	Convinced to change ideologically and treated as wavering class as much as possible
47	Small service traders	Made their living as small service traders	Ideologically indoctrinated
48	Those from the South (third category)	Families of laborers and peasants from South Korea who were not guilty of political crime	Ideologically indoctrinated
49	No assigned category	Those who did not enter a political party	Ideologically indoctrinated
50	Party member	Party member	Core class, treated as cadre
51	Capitalist	Those who lost all of their commercial assets to nationalization after 1946	Strict surveillance

## APPENDIX C:

### Class-Strata of *Songbun* Categories

The Korean Institute for National Unification, a think tank for the ROK Ministry of Unification, puts the 51 songbun categories in Table 2 into categories that relate to the three songbun classes of core class, wavering class, and hostile class.

Table 2: Three Songbun Classes and 51 Sub-categories

Core Class	<p>People from the families of laborers, hired peasants (farm servants), poor farmers, and administrative clerical workers during the Yi (Chosun) Dynasty and Japanese occupation, Korean Workers' Party cadre members; bereaved families of revolutionaries (killed in anti-Japan struggles); bereaved families of patriots (killed as noncombatants during the Korean War); revolutionary intellectuals (trained by North Korea after liberation from Japan); families of those killed during the Korean War; families of those killed in action during the Korean War; servicemen's families (families of active duty KPA officers and men); and family members of service members wounded during the Korean War. - Recruit as staff of party, government or military.</p>	<p>- Set apart from individuals of other class, and offer special privileges (in college matriculation, promotion, rations, residence, treatment and other areas).</p>
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<p>Wavering Class</p>	<p>People from the families of small merchants, artisans, small factory owners, small service traders; medium service traders; unaffiliated persons hailing from South Korea; families of those who went to the South (1st Category); families of those who went to the South (2nd Category); People who used to be medium-scale farmers; national capitalists; families of those who went to the South (3rd Category); those who repatriated from China; intellectuals trained before national liberation; the lazy and corrupt; tavern hostesses; practitioners of superstition; family members of Confucianists; people who were previously locally influential figures; and economic offenders</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Employ as low-level managers or technicians.</li> <li>- Promote a limited number to the "core masses" class.</li> </ul>
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Hostile Class	<p>People from the families of wealthy farmers, merchants, industrialists, landowners, or those whose private assets have been completely confiscated; pro-Japan and pro-US people; reactionary bureaucrats; defectors from the South; members of the Chondoist Chongu Party; Buddhists; Catholics; expelled party members; expelled public officials; those who helped South Korea during the Korean War; family members of anyone arrested or imprisoned; spies; anti-party and counter-revolutionary sectarians; families of people who were executed; anyone released from prison; and political prisoners; Members of the Democratic Party, capitalists whose private assets have been completely confiscated.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Assign to dangerous or hard labor.</li> <li>- Block and suppress from school admissions, college matriculations, and Party membership.</li> <li>- Classify as subjects of control, surveillance and persuasion.</li> <li>- Control: By forcible relocation, separate accommodation.</li> <li>- Surveillance: Place under constant surveillance of movements.</li> <li>- Persuasion: Intensive re-education.</li> <li>- Re-classify very limited numbers (ex. Children)</li> </ul>
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The Korean Institute for National Unification also attempts to list songbun categories in simpler terms. The 'basic masses' is a modernized North Korean term for the wavering classes with some modifications whereas the "complex class" is the modernized term for the hostile class with parallel modifications, particularly in terms of North Korean internal surveillance duties.

## APPENDIX D:

### Categories of Personal Background

Special Class	Families of Revolutionary Fighters and Patriots (1-2 %)
Core Masses	Party members; families of war-dead (if death is confirmed), Families of honorees and rear-area military families, rich/poor farmers, clerks, and workers
Basic Masses	KWP Party members, clerks, workers, families of honorees, South Korea volunteers to People's Army, new intellectuals
Complex Masses	Intellectuals, South Korean refugees and voluntary entrants, Returning POWs, Families of defectors (to South Korea), Small/medium merchants and skilled workers, former waitresses and families of shamans, former Confucian scholars and the rural area (bourgeois) leaders, former intellectuals, and economic criminals.
Under Surveillance	Families of former landed class, entrepreneurs, bourgeois farmers; families of former pro-Japanese, pro-American activists, and staff of enemy organizations; religious practitioners; former inmates, Party members (dropped from membership), persons fired from jobs, families of inmates and those arrested.

In Table 4, the Korean Institute of National Unification further breaks down the hostile (or complex) class in terms of assessment, surveillance, and treatment. The people in these classes are considered as hostile of an enemy as South Korea, the United States, or Japan. North Korean refugees interviewed for this report point out that the surveillance is intense and continuous.

## APPENDIX E:

### Categories of the Complex Masses

Dictatorship targets	These are the people who are trying to overturn the current North Korean system and regime. They should be segregated from ordinary inhabitants and moved to the so-called "safe zones" such as coal mine areas or mountainous highlands,
Isolation targets	These are very dangerous people who will participate in or are likely to support South Korean causes should circumstances warrant. They will be exposed to the basic masses for purposes of collective surveillance.
Inclusive education targets	These people include those belonging to "potential disturbance groups." They committed only minor misdemeanors, which do not "qualify" them as prime targets. These are people who are generally deemed redeemable through intensive ideological education.

## **Front Cover Description**

Center Image: Fused faces of Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un

Inner Circle of Badges: Core Class

Middle Circle of Badges: Wavering Class

Outer Circle of Badges with Barbed Wire: Hostile Class



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