HAIRAN Series IIUS
Expert Notes 2026-23

고려대학교 통일융합연구원
Institute for Interdisciplinary Unification Studies

Ideological Erosion and Intensifying Control: The Paradox of North Korean Regime Stability

October 20, 2026

JOO, Hyung-min
Professor, Korea University

Hyung-min Joo earned his Ph.D. in political science from the University of Chicago. Since 2012, he has served as a North Korea expert for V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) and as a policy adviser to South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Unification.

How should we assess the stability of the North Korean regime? From the outside, North Korea appears to be a highly disciplined authoritarian state sustained by ideological conformity and pervasive political control. Beneath this image, however, lies a more complex reality. Commitment to Juche ideology has weakened, materialism and informal economic activity have spread, and private criticism of the leadership coexists with the consumption of foreign cultural products. Crucially, these patterns are not limited to ordinary citizens; they also appear among the ruling elites responsible for administering and defending the regime.

This raises a fundamental puzzle: Why does the regime remain resilient even as ideological commitment erodes among those who sustain it? Does growing ideological disaffection signal increasing instability, or can it coexist with mechanisms that reinforce authoritarian survival? Addressing these questions requires distinguishing ideological conviction from political compliance, and examining how elite interests and institutional constraints prevent private dissent from developing into collective opposition.

Public Loyalty, Private Disbelief, and Elite Doublethink

James C. Scott's concept of "hidden transcripts" offers a useful framework for understanding the gap between public conformity and private attitudes under authoritarian rule. What individuals say in the presence of those in power may differ substantially from what they believe or express in less visible settings. In highly coercive systems, public displays of loyalty may reflect strategic accommodation rather than genuine ideological conviction.

In-depth interviews with 24 North Korean defectors who previously worked in the party, government, military, security apparatus, and cultural institutions reveal this divide among segments of the ruling elite. Interviewees described growing skepticism toward Juche ideology, the pursuit of material gain, private criticism of senior officials and the ruling family, and interest in South Korean culture. Many reported publicly affirming ideological orthodoxy while privately questioning the system's legitimacy.

The famine of the 1990s marked a critical turning point. As the state distribution system collapsed, survival increasingly depended on markets and informal economic networks rather than state provision. This experience weakened the perceived link between political loyalty and material security. Among ruling elites, access to economic opportunities increasingly rivaled ideological standing as a source of career advancement and personal advantage. Bribery and informal transactions became embedded in everyday life.

Particularly revealing is evidence that such attitudes extended into the state security apparatus itself. Officials tasked with detecting and suppressing ideological deviance were not immune to the skepticism, materialism, and private criticism they were expected to police. This suggests that outward ideological loyalty and the operational effectiveness of authoritarian institutions are analytically distinct. A coercive apparatus can continue to function even when some of its personnel no longer fully embrace the ideology it is charged with defending.

Why Disbelief Does Not Become Resistance

The coexistence of private dissent and public obedience cannot be explained solely through conventional accounts of rewards and punishments. Material privileges encourage conformity, while the threat of severe punishment discourages defection. Yet this familiar carrot-and-stick explanation does not fully explain why elites who recognize the regime's shortcomings may nevertheless have a powerful stake in preserving it.

The idea of a "community of destiny" offers a further explanation. For North Korea's ruling elites, the political system is not merely an authority to which they must submit; it is also the institutional foundation of their status, privileges, and personal security. Regime collapse could mean not only the loss of material advantages but also threats to their personal safety and survival.

Declining confidence in the leadership, therefore, need not translate into support for regime change. Elites may remain loyal not because they believe in the system, but because their political and personal survival is closely bound to its continuation.

This logic is especially relevant to personalist authoritarian regimes, in which access to power and privilege is closely tied to the ruler and the ruling coalition. Shared vulnerability to regime collapse can reinforce elite cohesion even when ideological conviction is weak. Private criticism may thus coexist with active participation in preserving the political order.

A related puzzle is why widespread grievances fail to generate collective resistance. Political dissatisfaction alone cannot produce organized opposition. Collective action also requires networks of trust, relatively autonomous social organizations, and recognizable "focal points" around which individuals can coordinate.

North Korea's pervasive surveillance and restrictions on independent social organization severely limit these conditions. Individuals may privately harbor similar grievances while remaining uncertain about others' willingness to act. The risks of initiating resistance are high, and the prospects for successful coordination remain limited.

The regime's durability thus depends not only on the strength of ideological commitment but also on the structural barriers to elite defection and collective mobilization.

Marketization, State Control, and the Limits of Liberalization

The expansion of markets and access to outside information have transformed aspects of North Korean society. Yet neither development should automatically be equated with political liberalization or a decline in state capacity.

Markets have provided alternative means of survival and reduced reliance on the state distribution system. At the same time, they have enabled state agencies and political elites to extract resources, regulate commerce, and establish new forms of economic control. Marketization can therefore weaken some instruments of authoritarian governance while reinforcing others.

This tension warrants renewed attention amid North Korea's expanding military cooperation with Russia and the prospect of greater state-directed economic activity. The key question is no longer simply whether markets operate outside formal state planning, but who controls their resources and distribution networks—and who captures the benefits.

The intensification of social control presents a similar ambiguity. Expanded surveillance and harsher restrictions may demonstrate the regime's enduring coercive capacity. Yet they may also suggest that established ideological and political mechanisms are increasingly unable to secure voluntary compliance. Greater coercion does not necessarily indicate stronger ideological cohesion; it may instead reflect a response to weakening conviction and growing social autonomy.

Nevertheless, latent grievances must be distinguished from an actual political crisis. For private dissatisfaction to threaten regime survival, additional conditions would likely be necessary, such as divisions within the ruling coalition, opportunities for collective coordination, or a substantial weakening of coercive institutions. Ideological erosion alone offers no reliable basis for predicting when—or whether—the regime might collapse.

Rethinking North Korean Regime Stability

A rigorous assessment of North Korean regime stability must distinguish three dimensions: the persistence of ideological legitimacy, the alignment of elite interests with regime survival, and the state's capacity to prevent individual grievances from becoming organized political opposition.

These dimensions need not change in tandem. Ideological commitment may weaken while elites remain heavily dependent on the political system. Private dissatisfaction may spread even as the state retains the capacity to suppress collective mobilization. Apparent stability can therefore coexist with profound underlying social and ideological change.

The evidence also warrants methodological caution. Interviews with former North Korean elites provide valuable insight into otherwise inaccessible political attitudes, but defectors cannot be assumed to represent the entire ruling elite, let alone the broader population. Variation in their departure dates, together with subsequent changes in North Korea's political and economic environment, further limits how confidently these accounts can be generalized to present conditions.

The central analytical implication nevertheless remains clear: North Korean regime stability cannot be explained by ideological loyalty alone. It must also be understood in terms of the political structures that sustain compliance despite declining belief. Ideological erosion and intensified control are not mutually exclusive; they can occur simultaneously through distinct, and potentially mutually reinforcing, mechanisms.

The crucial question for North Korea's longer-term trajectory is therefore not simply how much discontent exists among ordinary citizens or the ruling elite, but under what conditions private disaffection might develop into elite defection or coordinated political resistance. Explaining the gap between widespread dissatisfaction and organized opposition is essential to understanding both the resilience of North Korea's authoritarian system and the vulnerabilities beneath its apparent stability.