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A Nation of Racist Dwarfs

Kim Jong-il's regime is even weirder and more despicable than you thought.

By Christopher Hitchens

Posted Monday, Feb. 1, 2010, at 10:01 AM ET



Visiting North Korea some years ago, I was lucky to have a fairly genial "minder" whom I'll call Mr. Chae. He guided me patiently around the ruined and starving country, explaining things away by means of a sort of denial mechanism and never seeming to lose interest in the gargantuan monuments to the world's most hysterical and operatic leader-cult. One evening, as we tried to dine on some gristly bits of duck, he mentioned yet another reason why the day should not long be postponed when the whole peninsula was united under the beaming rule of the Dear Leader. The people of South Korea, he pointed out, were becoming mongrelized. They wedded foreigners—even black

American soldiers, or so he'd heard to his evident disgust—and were losing their purity and distinction. Not for Mr. Chae the charm of the ethnic mosaic, but rather a rigid and unpolluted uniformity.

I was struck at the time by how matter-of-factly he said this, as if he took it for granted that I would find it uncontroversial. And I did briefly wonder whether this form of totalitarianism, too (because nothing is more "total" than racist nationalism), was part of the pitch made to its subjects by the North Korean state. But I was preoccupied, as are most of the country's few visitors, by the more imposing and exotic forms of totalitarianism on offer: by the giant mausoleums and parades that seemed to fuse classical Stalinism with a contorted form of the deferential, patriarchal Confucian ethos.

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Karl Marx in his *Eighteenth Brumaire* wrote that those trying to master a new language always begin by translating it back into the tongue they already know. And I was limiting myself (and ill-serving my readers) in using the pre-existing imagery of Stalinism and Eastern deference. I have recently donned the bifocals provided by B.R. Myers in his electrifying new book *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves and Why It Matters*, and I understand now that I got the picture either upside down or inside out. The whole idea of communism is dead in North Korea, and its most recent "Constitution," "ratified" last April, has dropped all mention of the word. The analogies to Confucianism are glib, and such parallels with it as can be drawn are intended by the regime only for the consumption of outsiders. Myers makes a persuasive case that we should instead regard the Kim Jong-il system as a phenomenon of the very extreme and pathological right. It is based on totalitarian "military first" mobilization, is maintained by slave labor, and instills an ideology of the most unapologetic racism and xenophobia.



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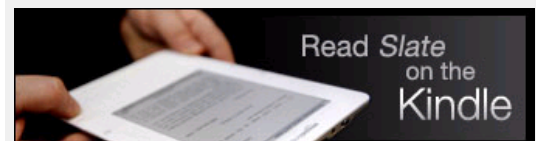
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These conclusions of his, in a finely argued and brilliantly written book, carry the worrisome implication that the propaganda of the regime may actually mean exactly what it says, which in turn would mean that peace and disarmament negotiations with it are a

waste of time—and perhaps a dangerous waste at that.

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Consider: Even in the days of communism, there were reports from Eastern Bloc and Cuban diplomats about the paranoid character of the system (which had no concept of deterrence and told its own people that it had signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty in bad faith) and also about its intense hatred of foreigners. A black Cuban

diplomat was almost lynched when he tried to show his family the sights of Pyongyang. North Korean women who return pregnant from China—the regime's main ally and protector—are forced to submit to abortions. Wall posters and banners depicting all Japanese as barbarians are only equaled by the ways in which Americans are caricatured as hook-nosed monsters. (The illustrations in this book are an education in themselves.) The United States and its partners make up in aid for the huge shortfall in North Korea's food production, but there is not a hint of acknowledgement of this by the authorities, who tell their captive subjects that the bags of grain stenciled with the Stars and Stripes are tribute paid by a frightened America to the Dear Leader.

Myers also points out that many of the slogans employed and displayed by the North Korean state are borrowed directly—this really does count as some kind of irony—from the *kamikaze* ideology of Japanese imperialism. Every child is told every day of the wonderful possibility of death by immolation in the service of the motherland and taught not to fear the idea of war, not even a nuclear one.

The regime cannot rule by terror alone, and now all it has left is its race-based military ideology. Small wonder that each "negotiation" with it is more humiliating than the previous one. As Myers points out, we cannot expect it to bargain away its very *raison d'être*.

All of us who scrutinize North Korean affairs are preoccupied with one question. Do these slaves really love their chains? The conundrum has several obscene corollaries. The people of that tiny and nightmarish state are not, of course, allowed to make comparisons with the lives of others, and if they complain or offend, they are shunted off to camps that—to judge by the standard of care and nutrition in the "wider" society—must be a living hell excusable only by the brevity of its duration. But race arrogance and nationalist hysteria are powerful cements for the most odious systems, as Europeans and Americans have good reason to remember. Even in South Korea there are those who feel the Kim Jong-il regime, under which they themselves could not live for a single day, to be somehow more "authentically" Korean.

Here are the two most shattering facts about North Korea. First, when viewed by satellite photography at night, it is an area of unrelieved darkness. Barely a scintilla of light is visible even in the capital city. (See [this famous photograph](#).) Second, a North Korean is on average *six inches* shorter than a South Korean. You may care to imagine how much surplus value has been wrung out of such a slave, and for how long, in order to feed and sustain the militarized crime family that completely owns both the country and its people.

But this is what proves Myers right. Unlike previous racist dictatorships, the North Korean one has actually succeeded in producing a sort of new species. Starving and stunted dwarves, living in the dark, kept in perpetual ignorance and fear, brainwashed into the hatred of others, regimented and coerced and inculcated with a death cult: This horror show is in our future, and is so ghastly that our own darling leaders dare not face it and can only peep through their fingers at what is coming.

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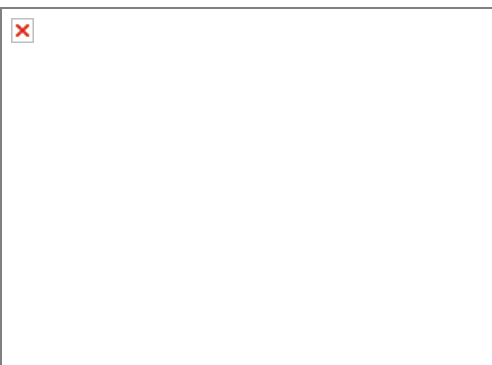
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