

## **Post-Communist Transition Revisited: The North Korean Regime in a Comparative Authoritarian Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

The view of convergence in terms of process of direction of change in the former state socialist countries invites questions about the cases of non-transition and their typological regime features. The paper examines the North Korean regime to assess its uniqueness in the path of post-communist transition and plausible explanations to the divergent outcome. North Korea's non-transition owes much to its unique behavioural features derived from different historical experience, leadership, legitimation, and political culture. The country-specific developments challenge the general transition paradigm, and warrant the behavioural approaches rather than institutional approaches to transition in studying the cases of non-transition. In regard to North Korea, the question is no longer finding the prototype of transition that is recommendable, but accepting the country-specific development process in search for alternatives, which may lead to a distinctive path and process. The observation of North Korea invites a new comparative

perspective on the remaining socialist countries in Asia, which brings the framework of transition from the authoritarian rule in assessing the prospects and challenges of political change.

**Keywords:** *post-communist transition, non-transition, North Korean regime, political elites, authoritarianism*

## 1. Introduction

Neither the third wave of democratisation that explains the breakdown of the authoritarian regimes nor the so-called “Refolution”<sup>1</sup> that describes the breakdown of the socialist bloc has relevance to the case of Asian communist countries. Some countries, such as China and Vietnam, have clearly deviated from the post-communist development manifested in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, but, nonetheless, managed to bring rather stable and successful reforms. A country like North Korea has continued the main features of the old system without major political and social progress towards democratisation or liberalisation, and is still surviving. These Asian cases rekindle scholarly debates on the “convergence of system” theory in explaining the post-communist development and reviewing of the theoretical approach to post-communist transition that can accommodate the cases of both transition and non-transition.

The collapse of state socialism<sup>2</sup> represents the failure of grandiose historical project that had ended without reaching the final system of communism. A number of scholars pinpointed various economic, political, social, ideological and external factors as reasons for the collapse of the socialist bloc (Dahrendorf, 1990; Brown, 1991; Fukuyama, 1992; Kennedy, 1993; Lane, 1996; Linz and Stepan, 1996; Holmes, 1997). They concurrently argue that the collapse of state

socialism is a multi-causal phenomenon, hence there is no one single cause or set of causes to explain such a complicated phenomenon occurred in culturally diverse countries. Consequently, there has been no concrete and coherent theory on the collapse of the state socialist system derived from the analysis.

Scholarly discussions rather quickly moved on to post-communist developments: the studies of democratisation, consolidation, and transition progress in the former socialist countries predominated the field of transitology. The initial study of the post-communist transition had widely focused on the convergent path of development, in which all states discard the old state socialist system and replace it completely with an alternative system of democracy and market (Brown, 1991; Fukuyama, 1992; Linz and Stepan, 1996). Along this process, the cases of non-transition have been largely neglected or regarded as transition laggards (Saxonberg, 2013).

The paper is an attempt to bring back the subject of transition and non-transition from communism to illustrate the cases of diverging outcomes and to explain different trajectories of transition based on the existing theoretical approaches. The discussion will focus exclusively on the case of North Korea. From the discussion, the paper will bring out North Korea's distinctiveness that deviates from the existing path of development and proposes rethinking of regime typology in the post-communist era. The paper will also draw implications from the North Korean case to rethink about the developments of other surviving Asian communist states in the contemporary world.

## 2. Conceptual Framework: Rethinking Transition from Communism

In his work *The end of history and the last man*, Fukuyama (1992) claims that the history of ideas had ended with the recognition of liberal democracy as the final form of human government. The East European countries and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) have gone through a system change following the fall of the socialist bloc, which contoured a simple one-way trajectory of transition towards political pluralism, democracy, and the market. However, when we look closely into the decades of post-communist transition, we notice various paths of development in the former and present state socialist countries and their divergent outcomes. Understanding of such variations in the transition process calls for reconceptualisation of post-communist transition as well as regime features of the cases of non-transition.

### 2.1. Transition: System Change of State Socialism

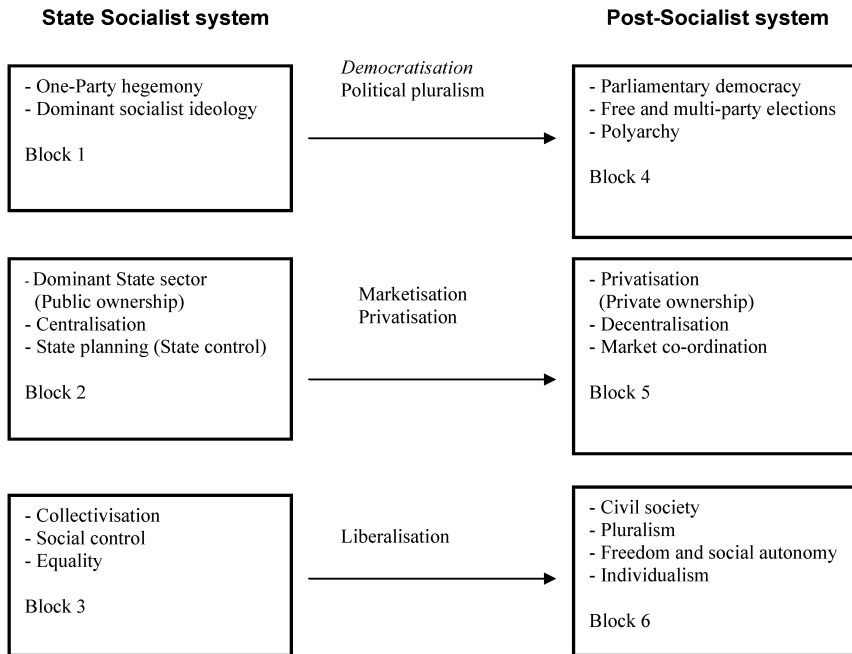
Taking “system” as a generalised and comprehensive concept, Kornai defines system change as a process in which a society shifts away from the fundamental characteristics of one system and transforms itself to another system with a completely different configuration (Kornai, 1998: 11). The system change, thus, involves a comprehensive transformation of main features of political, ideological, economic, and social dimensions within a system. The system change normally occurs through an evolutionary process, but post-communist transition was a unique and unprecedented example of system change, which featured the rapidity and radical nature of transition. It was a revolutionary system change in which the transformation of fundamental characteristics of state socialist system occurred simultaneously.

Lane describes state socialism as “a society distinguished by a state-owned, centrally administered economy, controlled by a dominant communist party which seeks, on the basis of Marxism-Leninism and through the agency of the state, to mobilise the population to reach a classless society” (Lane, 1996: 5). The distinctive political, ideological, economic features of state socialist system may be enlisted as a communist party monopoly of political power, a communist ideology, and a planned economy with public ownership of the principle means of production. The relinquishment of monopoly of power of the communist parties through free, multi-party elections, the abandonment of the communist ideology, and the revolutionary program of instantly transforming the planned economy into a market economy altogether characterise the system change of state socialism; this is what we refer to as post-communist transition of Eastern European countries.

Figure 1 shows the general direction of the system change of state socialism. The figure characterises the fundamental features of two distinguishable systems: state socialist system and post-socialist system. There may be various kinds within each system; however, the specific manifestations of socialism or post-socialism are assumed to have common features that constitute variants of the same system.

Block one, two, and three present the main characteristics of a socialist system while block four, five, six represent those of a post-socialist system. Upper blocks (block 1 and 4) are the features within the political and ideological sphere; middle blocks (block 2 and 5) are the features of the economic subsystem; and the lower blocks (block 3 and 6) are the features of social values. The main features of state socialist formation may be summarised as one-Party hegemony, dominant socialist ideology, public ownership, centralised economy through central planning and state control. Those of post-socialist system may be pinpointed as an installation of some form of democracy with free and

**Figure 1** System Change from State Socialism

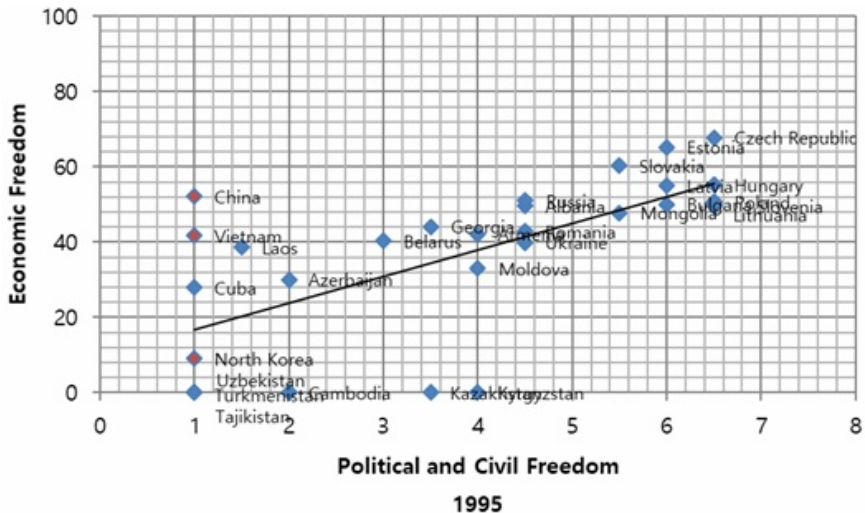


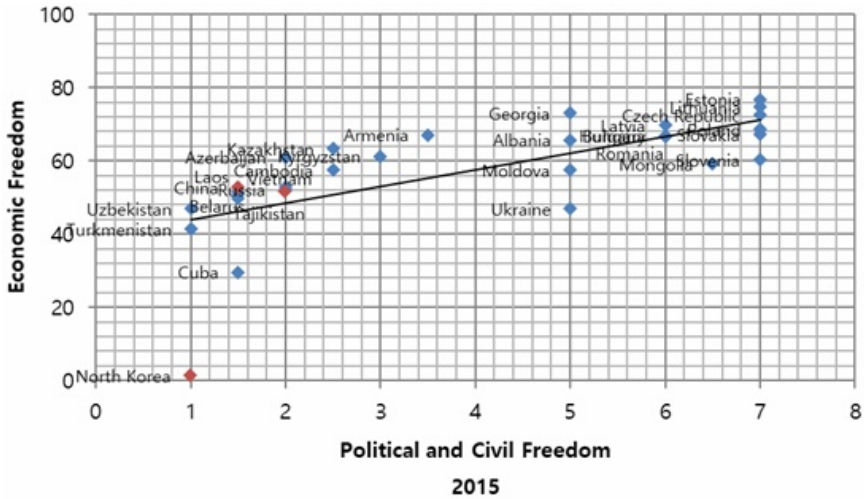
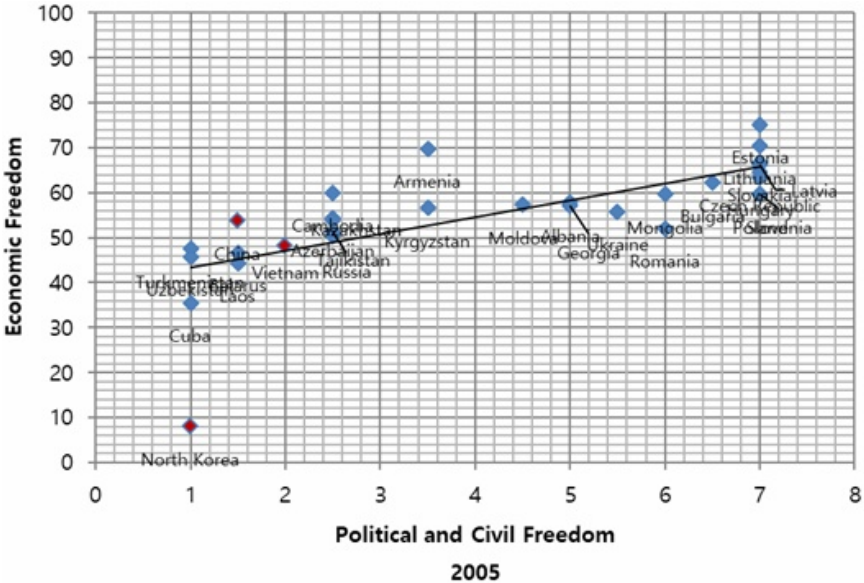
multi-party elections, pluralisation, absence of ideological monopoly, development of a market economy based on private ownership and decentralisation. The arrows indicate the direction of change and inducements for the change.

Transformation from a state socialist system to a post-socialist system can be gauged by the degree of democratisation (political pluralism) in the political system, marketisation and privatisation in the economic system, and liberalisation in the social system. The process and speed of system change from state socialism to a market economy polyarchy may vary among the countries depending on the degree of

democratisation, liberalisation and marketisation. Precise measurement is extremely difficult, nevertheless, the extent to which these processes have occurred in different socialist countries may be judged comparatively by employing relevant data.<sup>3</sup> The graphs in Figure 2 exhibit a varying degree of progress in terms of political, social, and economic developments of 28 former and present state socialist countries since 1995. Bottom Left indicate the least development and Upper Right indicate the most advanced democratic capitalism. Red dots are China, Vietnam, and North Korea, of which China and Vietnam shows some progress over time whereas North Korea remains at the very bottom.

**Figure 2** Post-Communist Development of 28 Countries in 1995, 2005, 2015







Noticeable in the graphs are the dots that have retreated backwards after 2005. If the convergence theory holds, a cluster of dots was supposed to move towards the direction of upper right in a more or less similar pattern. One implication drawn from the graphs is that post-communist transition needs to encompass the perception of diversity, deviation and regression in the transitional process.

The mechanism of transition from communism involves two simultaneous, but to some extent autonomous, processes: the breakdown of the declining system and the subsequent formation and consolidation of a new system. In this process, changes in the subsystems may not occur simultaneously and may proceed at different speeds and at different levels. If change occurs in one of the subsystems or at a policy level, it is a reform within the system rather than a system change. A complete departure from existing practice within all the political, ideological, and economic spheres is what constitutes the first stage of system change from state socialism. The second stage involves a transition progress of those countries that have abandoned the previous system of rule and adopted a post-socialist system.

While the first stage determines a trajectory of transformation, partial transformation, and non-transformation of the state socialist system, the successful and unsuccessful outcomes of transformation are shaped in the latter stage. Depending on the nature and the degree of transformation from the original state socialist system, there may be four different sets of countries distinguished as representatives of diverging outcomes of post-communist transition. Firstly, there are cases of successful transformation, which include the post-communist countries that have relatively successfully extricated themselves from state socialism, and replaced it with a new set of political, economic, social and legal systems. Secondly, cases of relatively unsuccessful transformation show either retarded transitional progress in terms of

political, economic, social and legal transformation or strong institutional legacies of state socialism. Thirdly, there are cases of partial transformation, which exhibit a distinctive evolutionary development of state socialism via a reform path like in China and Vietnam. Lastly, there exist cases of non-transformation which feature a lack of significant institutional change and continuation of the characterisation of the old system. These cases often feature coercive rule as well as a strongly repressed and controlled society, of which North Korea is an exemplary case.

## ***2.2. Non-transition: System Survival of State Socialism***

One plausible way of defining survival of state socialism is the presence of dominant and fundamental features of the old system. The characterisation of the state socialist system in the previous section pinpoints four main features of state socialism: (1) the formal hegemony of single party control and lack of political competition; (2) official socialist ideology; (3) a dominant state sector and public ownership; (4) central planning and regulation as the main form of economic organisation. Partial changes may have occurred in particular subsystems or on the policy-level; nevertheless, the state may still be regarded as a case of non-transition as long as it preserves these important institutional features constituting the state socialist system.

It may be argued that a communist-led regime is no longer communist when the communist party loses political power, even if great changes have taken place in the economic system or socio-economic structures. Scrutinising the Asian communist countries, the institutional and ideological foundations of communist rule have not been undermined. The Chinese Communist Party, the Communist Party of Vietnam, and the Korean Workers' Party (*Rodongdang*, 로동당 / 勞動黨) are still real locus of power and in control of the economy

and society of each respective country. China and Vietnam have shown a distinctive evolutionary development towards market socialism via a reform path without abandoning the existing polity. The market socialist reform resulted in a desirable economic effect and consent on pragmatic acceptance whilst the basic political organisation and operational system continued with one-Party hegemony exerting great control over the economy (Saxonberg, 2013). Significant changes that occurred in the economy have not yet caused instability or a major shift in the political and systemic order. North Korea, on the other hand, features a lack of significant institutional change in the state socialist system. Although there have been some limited reforms towards the market, North Korea often features coercive and military-oriented rule as well as a strongly repressed and controlled society. Whether the present North Korean regime represents a typical state socialist country is debatable. Nevertheless, on the basis of its major institutional features that conforms to the state socialist configuration, North Korea is categorised as a state socialist country. Presence of the dominant and fundamental features of the old system in this case is largely a consequence of absence rather than failure of transformation.

This kind of definition makes a clear distinction from transition laggards. A low degree of democratisation, liberalisation and marketisation in some CIS countries owes to reform failure, not to absence of transformation. These CIS countries had abandoned traditional practice within the political, ideological, social and legal spheres of state socialism and experienced the disintegration of an old system. One indication of system disintegration is the change in their Constitutions, which reflect significant institutional changes in these countries. Another indication is the remarkable improvement in political rights and civil liberties in these societies following regime change in the early 1990s (Freedom House, *Freedom in the World* 2001).

A simple way of distinguishing between transition and non-transition, therefore, may be the institutional features of a given country. From the official declarations in the Constitution, we may note the unchanged position of the Communist Party and other state socialist formal institutional features in all these societies. Although the Constitution may not define what actually happens in practice, it is an important public pronouncement of the institutional arrangement (Kwon, 2003, 29-34).

A point of departure for the discussion is the premise that there are countries that have survived the domino-like collapse of the socialist bloc of 1989-1991 and that their system has not been replaced by a conspicuously different economic and political system, at least formally. Whether these countries are refusing to abandon the existing system of rule or taking a different path of post-communist transition is a matter of contention. In the core of argument is that the cases of non-transition warrant a scrutiny of the nature of transformation and primary actors in the process. In the following section, theoretical approaches to transition will be reviewed in search for a paradigm in which divergent outcomes may be better explained.

### **3. Theoretical Explanations**

There are four major theoretical approaches to the study of transition based on social science theories of social change (Roeder, 1998; Reisinger, 1998). Two distinctions are central to the study of regime breakdown and the process of transformation: (1) behavioural versus structural approaches; (2) state-centred versus society-centred approaches, with the former stressing the autonomy of politics from society and the latter the dependence of the political realm on society. Reisinger (1998) developed a scheme that captures commonly noticed

differences in emphasis and goals among those who study social change processes. The different bodies of literature that illustrate particular theoretical approach to the study of democratisation in general and post-communist transition are categorised in each cell.

**Table 1** Theoretical Approaches to the Study of Transition

	State-centred	Society-centred
<b>Structural (Objectivists)</b>	<p><b>1. Institutions</b>  <b>a. Constitutional Engineering</b>  <u>General</u>  Aristotle (1995); Rae (1967); Lijphart (1984); Taagapera and Shugart (1989); Lijphart (1990); Shugart and Carey (1992); Satori (1994)  <u>Communist/Postcommunist countries</u>  Elster(1992); Linz and Stepan(1992); Clark(1996); Lane et al (2001)</p> <p><b>b. Neo-institutionalism</b>  <u>General</u>  March and Olsen (1989); Moe (1984); North (1990)  <u>Communist/Postcommunist countries</u>  Roeder (1993)</p>	<p><b>2. Modernisation</b>  <u>General</u>  Lerner (1958); Lipset (1959); Apter (1965); Moore (1967); Pye (1990)  <u>Communist/Postcommunist countries</u>  Lewin (1991); Hosking (1991)</p>
<b>Behavioural (Subjectivist)</b>	<p><b>3. Elite Political Culture, Ideology, or Interest</b>  <u>General</u>  Michels (1949); Mosca (1958); Pareto (1935); Rustow (1970); Putnam (1973); Przeworski(1986); O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986); Hagopian (1990); Di Palma (1990); Burton <i>et al.</i> (1992)  <u>Communist/Postcommunist countries</u>  Beck <i>et al.</i> (1973); Welsh (1976); Willerton (1992); Higley <i>et al.</i> (1996); Kullberg (1994); Lane (1996)</p>	<p><b>4. Mass Political Culture</b>  <u>General</u>  de Tocqueville (1835); Weber (1930); Almond and Verba (1963)  <u>Communist/Postcommunist countries</u>  White (1979); Barghoorn (1965); Brown and Gray (1979); Tucker (1973); Wegren (1996)</p>

The *state-centred and behavioural approach* represents the elitist approach. It emphasises elite political culture, ideology, and interest as an analytical factor in the process of transition and democratisation. The *state-centred and structural approach* includes two distinct, though not unrelated approaches. Constitutional engineering is based on premises that there are regularities between key institutional features and political outcomes. A number of empirical findings are used as a basis for recommending particular configurations of institutions for newly democratising countries. Neo-institutionalist approach is based on the path dependency assumption, focusing on how the formal rules of one or more institutions shape the behaviour of those operating within the institution.

The *society-centred and behavioural approach* considers an influence of political culture on polity. It tends to make political culture a fundamental concept, and thus employs surveys of public opinion and fieldwork as the dominant form of this type of research. The *society-centred and structural approach* represents the modernisation theories. It places an emphasis on the ways in which changes in economic institutions through industrialisation, urbanisation, the development of transportation and communication, and rise in education reshape societies in certain common way.

The four approaches have been employed by transitologists primarily to identify the pattern of establishment and consolidation of different types of liberal and partial democratic systems following the post-communist transition. Because they are predominately focused on understanding the circumstances under which democratic systems may be encouraged to emerge and flourish, some of the approaches may not have direct applicability in explaining non-transition. The applicability of structural approach, in particular, is very limited since it focuses

exclusively on the structural preconditions for democratisation, and takes all cases of regime change to be treated as part of the same wave of democratisation and as part of the common process of diffusion and casual interaction (Schmitter and Karl, 1994).

While the state-centred approach stresses institutions and elites as the major determinant of the transitional process and outcomes, the society-centred approach regards modernisation and mass political culture as important socio-economic and cultural preconditions of transformation. The society-centred approach, especially modernisation theory<sup>4</sup>, was popular among social scientists in explaining the third wave of democratisation based on the experience of transformation from authoritarianism in Latin America and East Asia. This approach, however, has a limited applicability to the analysis of breakdown of state socialism for the following reasons. Firstly, the basic characteristics of the state socialist system is a concentrated of power in the single centre (the communist party), centralised and state-run and largely nationalised economy, a highly centralised and relatively closed polity, and a society largely devoid of a bourgeoisie (Holmes, 1997; Rigby, 1990). Secondly, it features the political domination of society through the Communist Party and a weak civil society where there is a relative absence of civic culture and distinct large social strata having their own peculiar social interests or established political-ideological views. Such a weak society is less able to exert constraints on elites or on the state. In such a society, the social, economic and cultural factors cannot be expected to have the same effect as in other cases of regime change. Thirdly and most importantly, the breakdown of state socialist regimes was not a revolution driven by society, but dominantly propelled from the top. Much of the literature on the Soviet regime's dramatic implosion highlights the absence of mass action (e.g. Fish, 1995; Hough, 1997; Kotz, 1997). The populace, in many cases, played a minor role and was

never a primary actor in the transformation process from state socialism. In a state socialist society, the state's monopolisation of economic and public life left organisations outside the state with few resources by which they can increase the costs of oppression to political leaders (Dahl, 1971: 14-16). Such a weak society was thus less able to organise a strong opposition movement stemming from society.

Considering that the breakdown of the state socialist system was the process of abandoning state socialism as a system of power, in which political elite<sup>5</sup> was a primary actor who played a significant role, the state-centred behavioural approach may have some bearings to the analysis of transition and non-transition. The structure and process of elite politics have been considered crucial to the understanding of the process of change in a number of studies (O'Donnell, Schmitter and Whitehead (eds), 1986; Higley and Burton, 1989; Higley and Pakulski, 1995; Higley, Pakulski and Wesolowski (eds), 1998; Lane, 1996; Lane and Ross, 1998). One of the principal criteria of the elitist approach considers the behaviour and actions of the political elite groups and the political culture imposed upon the polity. In their typological study of non-democratic regimes, Linz and Stepan (1996) rightly point out that inner loss of commitment make post-totalitarian regimes vulnerable to collapse.

The elitist approach to the first stage of transition, where a breakdown of the old system occurs, may link legitimacy problems to the behaviour and action of the leadership, and thus to regime consequences. Legitimation crisis and its effect offer an interesting perspective on the breakdown and survival of state socialism (Kwon and Cho, 2014: 124-127). Legitimation crisis is generally induced by different factors depending on the dominant mode of legitimation pursued. This brings back the factors listed as the causes of the breakdown of state socialism and how they had influenced the



legitimacy of ruling by political elite under the communist rule. Behaviour and action of the communist leadership facing the crisis – generated by economic decline, erosion of original and founded ideology, alternative vision to the socialist system, or external factors such as Mikhail Gorbachev's reform – were crucial for the regime consequences. The collapse of self-legitimation among the communist leadership happened when the ruling elite lost its way to continue the rule based on socialist organisational principles. Although legitimation crisis can be overcome in different ways to ensure system prolongation (Holmes, 1997: 52-58), system collapse is inevitable if the leaders fail to overcome legitimacy problems.

Due to the nature of top-down legitimation in a communist system, ruling elite's loss of confidence in the legitimacy of its own domination or will to rule, or faith in the system, is fatal. When the leaders are exposed to identity crisis associated with legitimacy failure, they are deprived of willingness to continue ruling the existing system, and some may look into an alternative system (Di Palma, 1991). The system may collapse when the leaders fail to manage legitimation crisis successfully because they lose faith in what they are doing and in the very system they are supposed to maintain.

The theoretical implications for transition pinpoint that the behavioural approaches rather than structural/institutional approaches are more appropriate in explaining the determinants of transition and non-transition. In other words, the behaviour of primary actors and societal conditions within the given institutional setting have a better explanatory power in addressing the surviving communist states. Focusing on the absence of identity crisis or loss of legitimacy, one could investigate regime features of these surviving communist states in terms of formation and preservation of identity. The following section

will consider the regime features of North Korea as one of the surviving cases and the distinctiveness that has formed North Korea's behavioural characteristics.

#### 4. The North Korean Regime

Addressing the case of North Korea in post-communist transition, institutional setting may have little significance. North Korea features in a variety of typological categories of modern non-democratic regimes in accordance with the framing of institutional features and variables. Based on the universal features within a comparative framework, the North Korean regime is often classified as Totalitarianism, Authoritarianism, Sultanism or Personalistic Dictatorship (Linz and Stepan, 1996; Cheong, 1998; Chang, 1999; Cho, 2002; McCormack, 1993). Focusing on regime peculiarity, others describe North Korea as socialist corporatist state, *Suryong* (Supreme Leader, 수령 / 首領) system, monolithic leadership system, military state, theocratic state, and so on (Cummings, 1982; Wada, 2002; Suzuki, 1994; Suh, 2000). The forms of integration, legitimation and political management in North Korea have never been typical under the state socialist formation.

Deviation from the general path of socialist development had occurred in North Korea at an early stage of its regime consolidation process, and continued on a trajectory that differs from other state socialist states or departs from the convergent path of post-socialist transition. The behavioural approach to North Korea's lack of transition may point to the importance of elite unity and political culture that shape the regime type and peculiarities, which might have contributed to the collapse-proof North Korean regime.

In the formative stage of North Korean communist politics, there were several competing political factions and power struggles among the

communist leaders. The collective leadership, however, turned into a monolithic power structure centred on Kim Il Sung (김일성 / 金日成) through purges and elimination of other factions. By removing the opposition, Kim Il Sung established himself as the absolute ruler supported by a loyal cohesive elite. The concentration of power and formation of an integrated elite forged North Korea into an absolute monolithic totalitarian socialist state from the 1960s. The cult of personality intensified to consolidate Kim's power. Although personality cult existed in other socialist countries under Stalin or Mao, the personality cult in North Korea was peculiar in its scope, intensity, and duration. The cult was not confined to the individual, but extended to his family and relatives, which paved a way for a dynastic succession.

A leadership succession scheme, the father-son hereditary succession, markedly differentiates North Korea from other state socialist states' regimes. The leadership succession in the Soviet Union and China often accompanied an intense power struggle with the elite (Taras, 1989). Kim Il Sung sought a way to guarantee the continuation of the rule and his authority by designating his son, Kim Jong Il (김정일 / 金正日), as successor. In the process, he removed those who opposed the succession plan from key positions in the Party, state, and military to ensure his loyal supporters. Not only Kim Il sung prevented the possibility of challenge to his political power and eliminated possible conflict, a long-term preparation for succession to his son seems to have had a stabilising effect on the North Korean regime during the transition of leadership. There was no apparent internal conflict or power struggle within the North Korean power elite during the period of change of leader, which was often the case in other communist regimes. A succession of leadership throughout the three generations accentuating the "blood line" from Kim Jong Il to his son Kim Jong Un (김정은 / 金正恩) is rare for any non-democratic regime, let alone

state socialist regime. Nevertheless, legitimacy of leadership succession to Kim Jong Un has not been openly questioned.

Political culture based on Asian values may be pinpointed as another behavioural characteristics of the North Korean regime. The Asian societies tend to share similar characteristics of a specific set of values that are distinct from the Western ones. This is also known as the Asian values that stress social harmony, respect for authority and a belief in the family. The detailed features appear to have an explanatory power as to why the communist rule have well-survived in the Asian countries. First, there is a general disposition to respect leaders and the state because of the Confucian stress on loyalty, discipline, and duty. Second, there is broad support for “strong” government and general acceptance of state as a “father figure” that guides the decisions and draws up strategies for national development. Third, there is great emphasis on community and social cohesion. Lastly, the overriding priority is on growth and prosperity rather than individual freedom in the Western sense of civil liberty (Heywood, 2013: 278-279).

The overall feature of the Asian values makes the regime more susceptible to authoritarian/patrimonial type of ruling, hence to be more tolerant of powerful ruling parties. The Asian values emphasising hierarchy, respect for authority, strong government, and harmony tend to have a strong impact on the political culture that glue the elite together in many Asian countries. North Korea is no exception. Elite unity and cohesion has been relatively strong in North Korea; thereby, the ruling elite performed better in preventing, and in some cases, managing legitimisation crisis (Kwon, 2003). The study of elite cohesion and division under the Gorbachev leadership revealed a fragmented elite group with internal divisions in terms of ideology, institutional allegiance, and political culture in the configuration of the national elite in the Soviet Union (Lane, 1998: 90). In contrast, the North Korean

political elites remain strongly united ideocratically showing their personal commitment to the ideology and institutions of state socialism (Kwon, 2003; Saxonberg, 2013: 99-103). Such features in the political elite might have contributed to preventing legitimization crisis and accepting the status quo.

People with Asian values tend to be more fearful of confusion and anarchy caused by the change of system, thus prefer stability with the existing system rather than opt for a new social order. Democracy was hardly considered as an alternative system. A lack of democratic experience in North Korea, where communist regime was installed following decolonisation and foreign interference, left the regime relatively unfamiliar with the Western democratic values or with different conceptualisation of the Western type of democracy. Unlike Eastern European countries, North Korea that lacks true democratic experience has limited vision and strategy of reforming the existing system in the post-socialist era.

## **5. Prospect of Political Change in North Korea**

The nature of development in North Korea brings out some important features that might have effectively prevented implosion within the ruling elite or spontaneous regime collapse. The primary actor in the process of regime breakdown is generally an organised group or a new ascendant class that is capable of challenging the existing leadership's confidence in its own rule and the system it advocates. In the case of North Korea, this element was certainly missing. There is little change or differentiation in the ruling elite as well as absence of civic culture or established political-ideological views. These features are very much due to the unique development of the North Korean regime, in which the nature of the North Korean polity evolved towards monolithic and

dynastic configuration and a society strongly controlled and repressed. The North Korean regime has adopted the state socialist institutions, but featured the authoritarian regime behaviour. As Fukuyama (2011: 3-4) rightly pointed out, the authoritarian elites would have no interest in implementing democratic institutions that would dilute their power. The cohesive North Korean political elite who enjoys its own domination is unlikely to opt for democratisation and liberalisation. In the absence of alternatives, the existing leadership and its system of rule continues in North Korea. The main features of the old system persisted in North Korea. However, continuation of the North Korean state socialist system was not a consequence of the superior functioning of its system compared to other disintegrated systems or rigid adherence to the Utopian goal of communism, but of lacking an alternative vision as how to restructure the existing system without risking regime collapse.

The European experience has been considered the prototypical model for post-communist transition, and success or failure has been gauged by the speed of change and the level of stability of a new democratic capitalist system. Yet, this generalised conception of post-communist development towards political pluralism, democracy and the market was not the case for all post-communist countries. A refined and comprehensive theoretical understanding of transition and non-transition surely requires systematic and comparative empirical study of the communist countries, which brings out the distinctiveness of political culture and regime behaviour in light of Asian communist states.

The behavioural approach to post-communist transition points to the features of elite, political culture, ideology, and interest as important factors that explain the transition from state socialism. In the same context, regime survival of the remaining state socialist countries could be explained. A scrutiny of regime peculiarities of North Korea illustrates a unique path of development at its earlier stage that deviates

from normal functioning of the state socialist formation. Despite the institutional state socialist setting, the nature of the leadership, ideology, and political culture based on the Asian values have surely shaped North Korea's distinctive regime formation and identity. However, these very factors have deprived the North Korean regime of an alternative vision or organised opposition groups, thus making it incapable of devising an alternative post-socialist system.

A study of North Korea's deviation from the general post-communist development as well as observation of other Asian communist states that take a different path of development pose a new challenge to the existing studies of transition and comparative politics. A regime typological framework needs revision to include the behavioural paradigm as well as the cases of remaining communist states. The question is no longer finding the prototype of transition that is recommendable for North Korea, but searching for a new paradigm that embraces the country-specific development process which may take a distinctive path and process. The observation of North Korea invites a new comparative perspective on the remaining socialist countries in Asia in order to discuss the prospects and challenges of political change within the framework of transition from the authoritarian rule.

**Appendix 1** Date of Political and Civil Liberty and Economic Freedom

	1995		2005		2015	
Country	Political and civil liberty	Economic freedom	Political and civil liberty	Economic freedom	Political and civil liberty	Economic freedom
Albania	4.5	49.7	5	57.8	5	65.7
Bulgaria	6	50	6.5	62.3	6	66.8
Czech Republic	6.5	67.8	7	64.6	7	72.5
Hungary	6.5	55.2	7	63.5	6	66.8
Poland	6.5	50.7	7	59.6	7	68.6
Romania	4.5	42.9	6	52.1	6	66.6
Slovakia	5.5	60.4	7	66.8	7	67.2
Estonia	6	65.2	7	75.2	7	76.8
Latvia	6	55	7	66.3	6	69.7
Lithuania	6.5	49.7	7	70.5	7	74.7
Armenia	4	42.2	3.5	69.8	3.5	67.1
Azerbaijan	2	30	2.5	54.4	2	61
Belarus	3	40.4	1.5	46.7	1.5	49.8
Georgia	3.5	44.1	5	57.1	5	73
Kazakhstan	3.5	NA	2.5	53.9	2.5	63.3
Kyrgyzstan	4	NA	3.5	56.6	3	61.3
Moldova	4	33	4.5	57.4	5	57.5
Mongolia	5.5	47.8	6	59.7	6.5	59.2
Russia	4.5	51.1	2.5	51.3	2	52.1
Slovenia	6.5	50.4	7	59.6	7	60.3
Tajikistan	1	NA	2.5	50.4	2	52.7
Turkmenistan	1	NA	1	47.6	1	41.4
Ukraine	4.5	39.9	5.5	55.8	5	46.9
Uzbekistan	1	NA	1	45.8	1	47
Cambodia	2	NA	2.5	60	2.5	57.5
China	1	52	1.5	53.7	1.5	52.7
Cuba	1	27.8	1	35.5	1.5	29.6
Laos	1.5	38.5	1.5	44.4	1.5	51.4
North Korea	1	8.9	1	8	1	1.2
Vietnam	1	41.7	2	48.1	2	51.7

*Notes:* The rating on political rights represents the quality of democracy and the rating of civil liberties measures rights to free expression, to organise or demonstrate as well as personal autonomy apart from the state. Rating of 7 means having a high degree of freedom whereas rating of 1 means having least



political and civil freedom. The data is an average of the two ratings. The economic freedom data in scale from 0 to 100 shows the degree of change at the level of enterprise, markets and trade, and financial institutions in the countries to assess the degree of marketisation and privatisation. For the data of political rights and civil liberties, find the annual Freedom House report at <<https://freedomhouse.org/>>. For the economic freedom data, see the index of economic freedom of The Heritage Foundation at <<https://www.heritage.org/>>.

## Notes

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1. “Refolution” is a new term created from “reform” and “revolution” to describe the transformation process from state socialism, which features change that has been rapid and complete in which political and economic institutions have been replaced concurrently. The process has been described as the revolutionary double-breakthrough route of transition from state socialism (Pei, 1994: 18)
  2. The notion of “communism” has been widely used in the West, referring to the system that should be called “state socialist”. Communism was more of an ultimate goal, and intended final outcome, but never the reality. “State socialism” best describes the decades of experience of “building communism” in the countries that have put communism into practice. In this paper, post-communist transition refers to the breakdown of a state socialist system and its replacement with a new alternative system.
  3. The Freedom House measurement of political rights and civil liberties provides an index of the degree of democratisation and liberalisation in

different countries during different time periods. For economic change, the transition report of the EBRD measures the degree of economic change from central planning towards open market-oriented economies in different former socialist countries and the Index of Economic Freedom data of The Heritage Foundation measures the degree of marketisation and economic liberalisation in different countries.

4. Modernisation theory pinpoints the economic structure as an impetus of social change, in large part because they alter the balance of power among social classes. Identifying the impact of changing institutions and economic development on the mass public's beliefs and behaviours, modernisation theorists argue that the society is likely to be influenced by the industrialisation, urbanisation, and other socioeconomic transformations in a direction of greater complexity of thought, self-efficacy, and political demands. Accordingly, modernisation process brings about citizen's receptivity to a more democratic political culture; thus, economic development inevitably accompanies democratisation (Moore 1965; Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Fleron, 1996).
5. If political elite is generally defined as a politically influential person who is capable of making substantial political decision, the political elite in a state socialist regime narrows down to party-state bureaucracy: a limited network of individuals who play a key role in decision-making and a positional power elite based on Nomenklatura posts (Higley and Burton, 1989: 1997).

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# Postscript

