

This opinion piece “The god that failed — and then was gone” by PCI Board Member Tom Plate appeared in the Korea Times on December 21, 2011.

The god that failed — and then was gone

By Tom Plate

Los Angeles — And suddenly yet another communist god that failed was dead. Seemingly suddenly. Major historic chapter-ending news is often like that — it seems to happen so terribly suddenly.

Many North Koreans were said to be sincerely weeping. But for other people around the world, the end came none too soon. Worldwide eyes are quite dry and will so remain, for as long as there is historical memory.

What was remarkable about the death of Kim Jong-il, the despot of North Korea, was how quickly this historic “sudden news” reached the outside world. In Asia, you see, it’s amazing how significant news sometimes gets out no more rapidly than a backlash of taffy.

This can be the case regarding news about political big shots. Take the infamous example of the death of Japan’s Keizo Obuchi in 2000. It was kept from the Japanese people for as long as possible. After the prime minister’s stroke, which itself was only slowly reported, the true facts of his prolonged deep coma were blurred from public view.

But if death came slowly to North Korea’s Kim, rumored for some serious amount of time to be frail, the news did not. World communications are now so revolutionary these days that not even a reactionary state can hide things for all that long.

Consider another reason for the spread of the blockbuster news of the death of the leader of a country with a mere 24 or so million people and few tourist sites to brag about: it’s the introduced element of uncertainty. There’s no guarantee that what will follow the departed leader will prove more salutary for the people of North Korea than his decades of miserable incompetent rule. And isn’t that a terrible thought: That what lies ahead might just prove worse than what we have already experienced or witnessed.

A second factor is that for prideful Koreans, who rightly point to South Korea as a great success story, North Korea under the late Kim was an extreme embarrassment. It was so inarguably the worst managed country in Asia that it almost inspired a vague fondness for communist Albania. You could even summarize bad government in two words: North Korea. Everything about it seemed bent, even the formal title of the communist state: the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), what a joke!

So with the guy now gone, how can the next guy be worse? The answer to that might be: Don’t ask...

It’s depressing — but I have a confession to make: I have been and remain a cockeyed optimist. For years I have been trying to convince myself (and others) that only a denuclearized Korean Peninsula makes sense for the world.

But for Koreans on the peninsula? South Korea can certainly live without nuclear weapons if the North can. But can the leaders of the North? They look at the fallen Gadhafi regime and wonder: Might not it still be around had Libya been nuclear? Wouldn’t NATO have shied away from intervening if the probably crazy Gadhafi had had his finger on a nuclear trigger?

Perish that thought — and that any of Kim’s successors might take it to heart.

Let us instead entertain some good “sudden news” soon. Perhaps Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, doing such a commendable job for America, will show up in Pyongyang to start to put together a deal with the new transitional DPRK government. Or President Barack Obama will. Or maybe Ban Ki-moon, the head of the United Nations who has made so many Koreans everywhere proud, will take the historic initiative. Who can think of anyone more qualified?

Forget about the six-party talks. Even if they resume, their promise has come and gone. We know now, and we probably always knew at some level, that progress could only come with mutual concessions initiated from the very top — that middle-level negotiators from Pyongyang were generally too frightened of their bosses back home to depart substantially from frozen negotiating texts.

But send a former U.S. president or past or current secretary of state up there to Pyongyang and things could happen. My suggestion is to have someone at a very impressive level go and stay until a deal is done — stay for months. The goal is to have North Korea begin denuclearization so the world can develop enthusiasm for working with the transitional government toward step-by-step normalization. The only other major scenario is North Korean collapse. Even the South Koreans do not want that.

There is no shortage of potential heroes to begin the negotiation anew, even if the mountain to climb seems higher than Mt. Geumgang. But given how bad everything in the communist workers' paradise has been until now, history must turn and surprise us. The tragedy of North Korea must come to an end. We need some new sudden good news. Badly.

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