

THE LOGIC OF THE NORTH KOREAN DICTATORSHIP

**Ronald Wintrobe
University of Western Ontario
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A work in progress

A DICTATORSHIP, BUT WHAT KIND?

As all dictatorships do, the regime stays in power through using repression.

- Particularly repressive, as evidenced by the ban on any organized political opposition, the closed media, curbs on freedom of speech of any kind (eg sitting on a newspaper with a picture of Kim Il Sung on it), and the “sprawling” penal system
- But like any dictatorship which survives, and this one has survived for over 60 years, it cannot function on the basis of political repression alone, but needs loyalty

ORIGINALLY, IT WAS TOTALITARIAN

- Soviet style central planning, heavy industry.
- Loyalty fostered by Korean Workers Party
- Citizens classified in the 1950's into three kinds: tomato (core), apple (wavering) and grape (hostile) based on family background
- Later this was expanded to 51 groups, including 29 distinct hostile groups

A regime like this is *stable*

But triple shock of the 1990's: (collapse of communism in the USSR and Eastern Europe, China's turn towards capitalism, and South Korea's economic takeoff) meant a collapse in the economy and presumably a fall in loyalty towards the old regime.

In addition there was a succession crisis after the death of Kim Il Sung in 1994.

Normally the rational response for a totalitarian is to *reduce* repression

But if the regime is close to minimum power needed to survive this can be dangerous

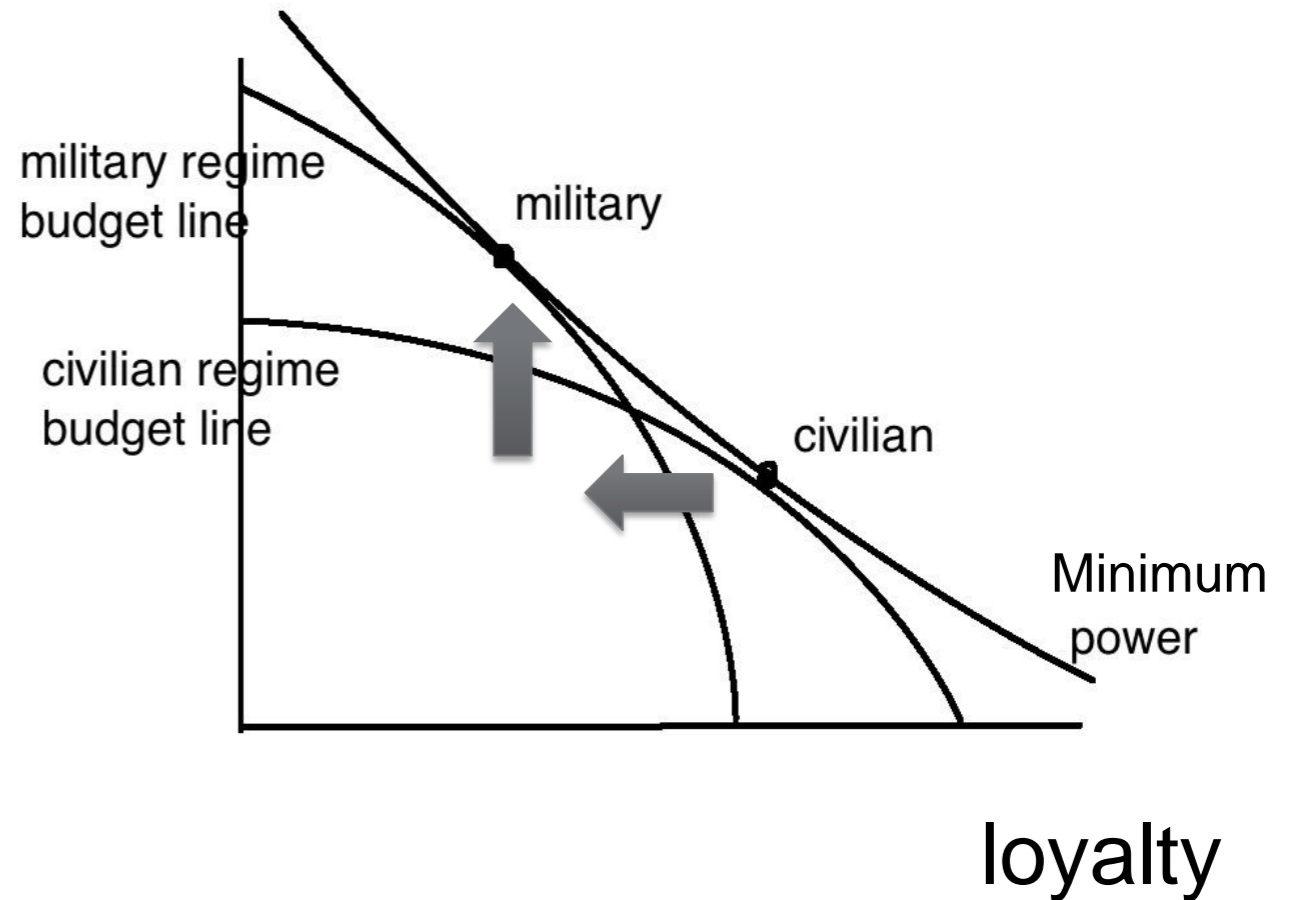
The only way to *raise* repression and not decrease power is to govern with the military, and this is what Kim Jong Il did.



WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN HIS LOGIC?

repression

A military regime has a comparative advantage at repression—can raise it at lower cost than a civilian one



BUT THERE IS A FLAW IN THIS SIMPLE STRATEGY: THE MILITARY IS A CLOSED HIERARCHY

What does that imply?

1. Career opportunities for military personnel outside the army, navy, etc. tend to be limited.

→ For this reason, military bureaus, unlike others, tend to be *budget maximizing*

→ Historically military regimes have dramatically increased the size of their budgets

2. Military regimes *do not easily tolerate civilian participation*, few military regimes have built mass parties



MILITARY REGIMES ARE UNSTABLE

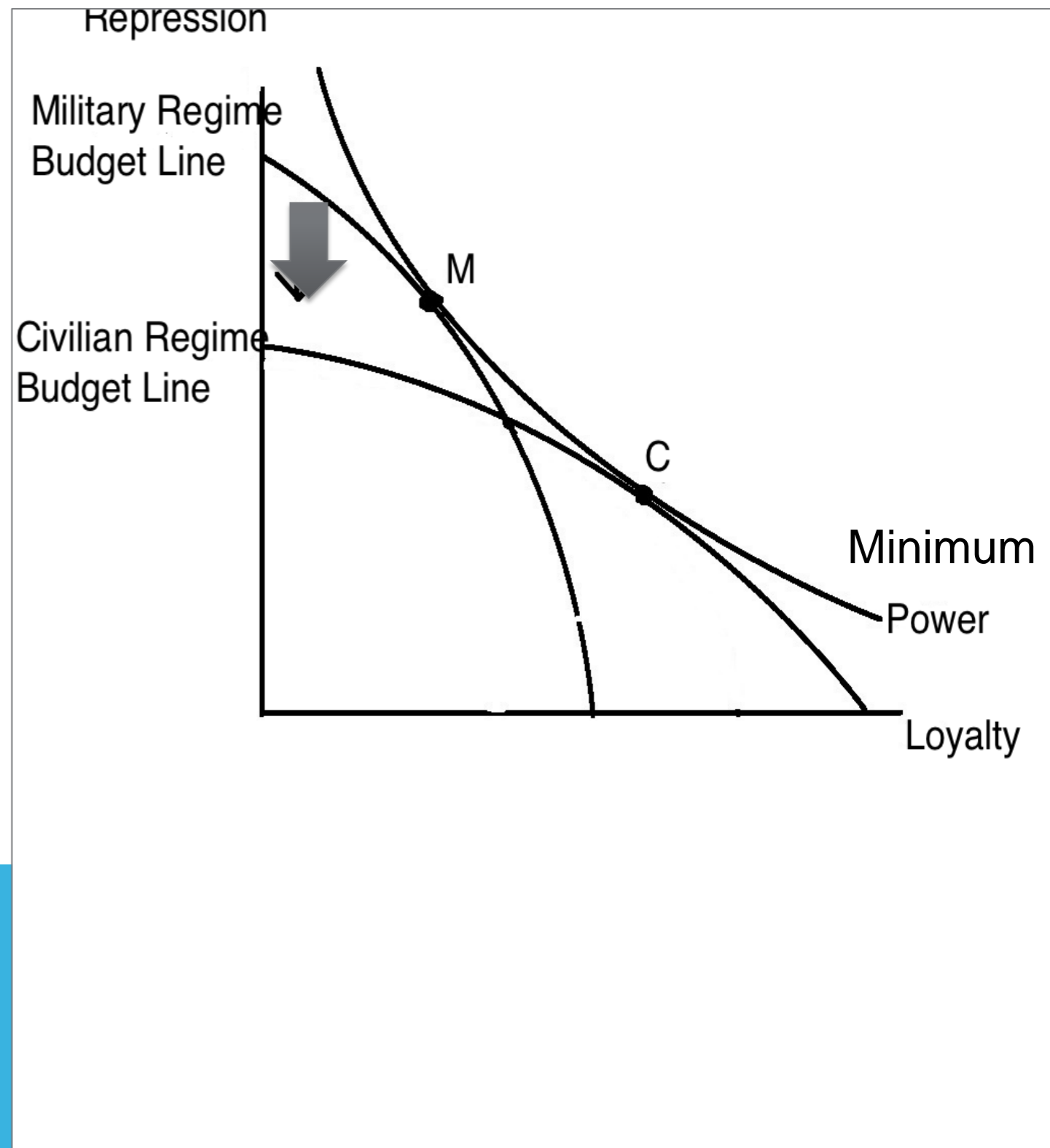
After they obtain power they tend to raise the military budget, and the wages of military personnel

But this means the price of repression rises




They destroy their own comparative advantage at governing!

“Sew the seeds of their own destruction”



.....INSTABILITY OF MILITARY REGIMES

- **Shortest and most fragile form of dictatorship: History of coups in Latin America, and even in South Korea**
 - **Countercoups twice as likely in military regimes as others**
 - **Normally the solution for a military regime is for the military to exit after a few years, and turn power over to civilians, having obtained guarantees against prosecution and protection for their military budget, as many military dictators in Latin America did**
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SONGUN: THE NORTH KOREAN SOLUTION

- 1. Solve these incompatibilities by militarizing the entire society!**

Songun or “Military first politics”:

North Korea today has the largest per capita army in the world: 1/5 of its working age population

and the largest proportion of GNP in the world devoted to military purposes

- 2. *Juche* — “self reliance” theocratic/nationalistic element to bind the population to a *single* leader—vastly expanded under Kim Jong Il**

SONGUN.....


One can argue that there are external, defence-related reasons for militarization

but the point here is that the logic of the militarization is *internal*—

i.e, to stabilize the regime against internal threats, not external ones



IS IT STABLE? YES, BUT...

1. The military constantly demanding more wages and more power is a source of instability, and can only be assuaged through constant feeding of the military appetite at the expense of promoting the civilian economy.
 2. Now there is a separate parallel military economy, completely integrated, and outside the plan. This is a potential source of conflict (as in Meiji Japan or modern Iran)
 3. Neither the military nor central planning are good at managing the economy, and the marriage of the two in North Korea would seem to be worse than the sum of its parts.
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DOES MILITARY FIRST POLITICS SOLVE THE LONG RUN ECONOMIC OR POLITICAL PROBLEM?

Central planning needs informal supplements to compensate for the rigidities of the plan—In Russia, *blat* (exchange of services) or *tolkach*, (supply pushers) in China *guanxi* (networks of contacts)

So that enterprises can solve their problems, especially shortages of inputs, without constantly referring problems up the hierarchy

But adaptations like these are incompatible with *military* values, because they break down discipline

DOES IT SOLVE THE POLITICAL PROBLEM?

Politically, “military first politics” *amplifies* the natural paranoia of dictators.

Because the regime lives on the basis of external threats, it has to exaggerate their seriousness to justify the vast militarization of the society

Constant focus on these dangers means the leaders themselves might come to believe in their own warnings to the people.



South Korean style export-led growth (the economist's favourite) *is* compatible with military rule

But paranoia boxes the North Koreans in, and North Korea is the world's most autarkic economy

**But there is a military solution: nuclear weapons can be used as blackmail to get foreign assistance, which now comprises 1/3 of foreign revenues
((Haggard and Noland, *Famine in North Korea*, p.5)**

REVOLUTION?

All around East Asia, especially in South Korea, people are getting rich while the North Koreans are not.

But the regime has boxed itself in with respect to opening up to the international economy.

Does this mean that a revolution like the Arab spring may be just around the corner?

- - immiserization does not produce revolution.
- - one can imagine a snowball of discontent occurring once it gets started, but there has to be some prospect of dissent for that to happen.

ENGAGEMENT OR ISOLATION?

- It is not obvious how the rest of the world can engage a regime like this:
- Marriage of 3 elements: totalitarian, military and theocracy
- Each of these is relatively hard to engage:
 - totalitarian vs tinpot,
 - military vs civilian
 - theocratic vs secular

SANCTIONS

- On the other hand, sanctions are unlikely to be effective without the cooperation of China and South Korea, which does not seem forthcoming
- Sanctions would make the people even poorer, it is not obvious that this would stimulate revolution
- And the isolation of a “cult “ which the regime also resembles, just breeds the capacity of the regime to attract loyalty of its citizens
- I come down on the side of engagement, but am gloomy about the likely success of either policy in getting the regime to liberalize politically or economically.