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Can religion give impetus for change in North Korea?

By

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Ex-post the church in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) is seen as an accelerator of opposition and a key element of democratization. Therefore, a justifiable and nearby thought is to analyze the development of the GDR churches in search for inspiration in order to finally ask whether the lessons learnt can be applied to North Korea at a time when it seems that an organized people movement is needed to bring about change in North Korea.

Church and Christian movement in North Korea

Survival as a Christian in North Korea is hard. The *Persecution of Christians Index* 2009 issued by the Christian Open Door Organization has ranked North Korea first place for seven years in a row (s. Table 1). God-like status is reserved for Kim Il Sung (“The eternal president”) and his son Kim Jong Il (“The dear leader”). The *Juch’e* ideology does not abide another believe of the people. Both the leader as god-like figure and the holy *Juch’e* ideology fulfill the function of a religion-like belief. Thus, any other form of religion is seen as being a dangerous influence from outside, hence regarded as a threat. The North Korean government massively persecutes churches which are operating in the underground. Christians are regarded as state enemies, once discovered or betrayed they will be arrested, tortured or executed.

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The amount of active Christians is estimated at 200,000 – 500,000. Between 50,000 and 70,000 are held hostage in labour camps. The same number is estimated to stay in China where several got in contact with the Christian belief and converted. On their return to North Korea they are helping to bring Christianity into their country.²

Table 1: Persecution of Christians Index 2009 (First 10)

	Country	2009 ¹	2008	PCI 2008*	Trend ²	Deviation ³
1.	North Korea	90,5	90,5	1	0	0,0
2.	Saudi-Arabia	67,0	64,5	2	-	0,0
3.	Iran	67,0	64,0	3	-	0,0
4.	Afghanistan	63,0	57,5	7	-	0,0
5.	Somalia	60,5	54,5	12	-	2,0
6.	Maldives	60,0	61,0	4	0	0,0
7.	Yemen	57,5	57,5	6	0	5,0
8.	Laos	55,0	56,5	8	0	0,0
9.	Eritrea	55,0	55,0	11	0	7,5
10.	Uzbekistan	54,5	55,0	9	0	0,0

Source: Open Doors Germany, 2009a

¹ Point system: 0= total freedom 100= total oppression

² Trend: “-”,=min. 2.5 points higher compared to previous year; “0”=no change of min. 2.5 points

³ Deviation: due to missing or unconfirmed information retained points

* Index rank in 2008

At the time of the great famine North Koreans who were being in search for food get in contact with small churches in rural villages along the Tumen River. Missionaries are active at the Chinese-Korean border. From there bibles find their way into North Korea. Some are sent with balloons over the border, some are hidden in rice bags. Little is known about the fact, that North Korea had quite a strong tradition of Christianity in the past. Before the Korean War the Christian population of Pyongyang was as high as 30% which is the reason why the city received the nickname “Jerusalem of the East”. Today there are no other further churches than four located in the capital, which are mostly used as an evidence that religious freedom is officially granted. Obviously these official churches serve as propaganda instruments only. Other local churches were destroyed or converted for other purposes.³

In order to practice the belief, North Korean churches are compelled to operate in the underground. Reports estimate approximately 1,000 underground churches in North Korea today with 135,000 members across the country. The government places much higher interest in arresting Christians than spies, giving evidence that a Christian movement represents a higher risk than espionage.⁴ Cases are reported where employees of the Conspiracy Department of the North Korean National Security Agency operate undercover to betray Christians. At the border area to China a faked underground church staffed by security agents was discovered. They pretended to be defectors and so approached Korean churches operating in China. They received money and bibles in order to promote the North Korean Christian movement. The purpose behind this is not only to hunt down Christians and missionaries; it is

² Open Doors Germany, 2009a/c

³ Vu, M., 2005

⁴ Kim, S.A., 2007

also a good financial source for the National Security Agency that directly receives the money provided by Christian organizations in South Korea.⁵

Christianity seems to spread even among police officials. A case is reported where a North Korean family became subject to a house check by two police officers while they were praying. The bible could be hidden in time, though it was found by one of the two police officers. He hid it however from his colleague and recommended to check another house, since nothing was found. Days later he returned the bible to the family and confessed that he was a Christian too but concealed it. According to the organization *Open Doors* Christians meet in North Korea in secret and started a campaign to pray for freedom and change. From their point of view, the leadership of Kim Jong Il has already started crumbling.⁶ So does the recent report of Jay Lefkowitz, U.S. special envoy for human rights in North Korea, say: “North Korea might be entering the final stages of its Stalinist era, after which the government is no longer able or willing to control all elements of daily life.”⁷

How was the situation in East-Germany in relation to the Christian movement? Can any parallels be drawn that could serve the North Koreans as good examples?

The Church and the Christian movement in the GDR – an inspiration?

Christians in the GDR were not very much appreciated. But only in the rarest cases they had to be afraid of their life. Particularly in the 1950s violence targeted Christians and they became subject to long sentences in jail. Nevertheless, it may not be forgotten that many young Protestants were put by force on private or professional paths that did not correspond with their individual ideas and desires.

The Protestant church had a special role in the socialist regime of the GDR as it was the only state-independent social organization, large by size. The ideologists of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (in German: *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, short form: *SED*) initially assumed the churches would sooner or later dissolve automatically as a civil relic in the course of the development to a more mature form of socialism. Initially, that is to say for the first twenty years, the protestant church of the GDR has been part of the protestant church in entire Germany, east and west. It stood under the common management of the Evangelical Church in Germany (in German: *Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland*, short form: *EKD*). Both had a common structure, organization, work groups, and so on as well as – a common vision of a united Germany. For the SED this was regarded as being a truly hostile organization.

Resistance to the GDR regime took the form of a desire for unification. As it appeared not to happen the GDR churches soon concentrated on GDR-specific problems and topics. In 1969, as political pressure on the protestant churches increased it became independent of the EKD and formed an association of the protestant churches of the GDR, the Union of the Evangelical Church in the GDR (in German: *Bund Evangelischer Kirchen in der DDR*, short form: *BEK*), which was officially recognised by the GDR in 1972. The regime interpreted and propagandized their independence as the formation of a “socialist church” associating agreement to the political ideology. Although politically neutral the BEK often took part in political discourses as far as Christians were affected; subjects included e.g. the destruction of churches, youth work or Christian attitudes on military topics. Soon other groups such as the peace movement, environment protection groups, political opposition and people who were willing to defect evolved. Besides these groups other groups existed too. Among their members were Christians who also took actively part. There were Third-World groups,

⁵ Yong, I.G.; Lee, S.J., 2007

⁶ Open Doors Germany, 2009b

⁷ U.S. Department of State, 2009

feminist groups or human rights groups. All these groups were politically alternative and critical, hence regarded by the SED as being oppositional and hostile. Christians belonged to this category as well. Compared to potential defectors who just wanted to leave the country these groups wanted to advance the GDR by advancing socialism. They called for democratic elections, demilitarization and civil rights.⁸

Since the beginning of the 1980s the St. Nicholas' Church in the City of Leipzig has organized prayers for peace to counteract the armament at that time. By 1989, after the prayers, the scenery was initially used by opposition groups demonstrating for democracy, freedom of press and freedom to travel. Police reacted brutally but instead of generating deterrence people solidarised. By November 1989 the small group of protesters had already grown to 300,000. Three days later and influenced by several other factors that should be underlined the Berlin wall fell. The famous Monday demonstrations in Leipzig were shown in the West German news. Defectors in West Germany who supported the opposition movement in East Germany with all kinds of technical equipment made this possible.⁹

Summary

Characteristics of the Christian movement in North Korea and the former GDR are fundamentally different and based on the facts presented before. While the Christians in the North can only operate in the underground, at risk of being sentenced to work in a labour camp, to torture or even to execution when identified as Christian, the Christians in the GDR were freer although they suffered from repression, too. Compared to non-members they had clearly many disadvantages. However, as a state-independent organization, they were officially recognised and therefore an institution that was capable of leading a dialogue with the government. Moreover, they were able to connect themselves to other political alternative groups representing together a quite large group that was dissatisfied with the present situation without having the prior goal to overthrow the state. Awareness, dialogue and organization – these factors can be considered as decisive advantages in this process.

As for North Korea creating awareness and dialogue seems to be a target for support. Even from a humanitarian angle alone. Awareness comes through information and that should be increased, e.g. through mutual development projects, continuous human and food aid, or why not initiating town twinning? Just to name a few. More contact will generate more awareness and people will start rethinking their attitudes. Even if the elite benefits it may have a positive impact. Dialogue is pivotal in order to exchange one's ideas und rethink one's standpoints. Thus, a dialogue with the outside world shall be maintained and a dialogue among the people within the country shall be supported. Time will show if the introduction of mobile phones and the internet in North Korea will increase dialogue and will finally lead to the third suggested step of grass roots community building – organization. An ecclesial movement alone did not cause the change in East Germany and it will not do in North Korea. But it provided an important ground to connect people and accelerate change in the long run.

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⁸ Silomon, A., 2009

⁹ Kowalczyk, I.S., 2005

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