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The Role of the Military in the Fall of the Ceausescu Regime and The Possible Relevance for a Post-Kim Jong-il Transition in North Korea

by Greg Scarlatoiu

In September 2008, reports began to circulate in the world media that Chairman Kim Jong-il might be in serious condition after having suffered a stroke, and discussion on possible post-Kim Jong-il transition scenarios in North Korea once again made the headline news. For a few months, plausible post-Kim Jong-il transition scenarios spanned a broad range, from military or collective rule to the hereditary transfer of power to Kim Jong-il's eldest son Jong-nam, youngest son Jong-un, or to brother-in-law Chang Sung-taek, under some type of protectorate, to total collapse of the regime, similar to the fall of Romania's Nicolae Ceausescu in 1989. Following immediately after the "Velvet Revolution" in Czechoslovakia and the more peaceful and orderly transition in other Eastern European countries, the violence of developments in Romania was shocking. Of all post-Kim Jong-il era scenarios, the worst-case scenario would seem to be a Romanian-style regime downfall, involving a country on the brink of civil war, the total collapse of authority, chaos, and bloodshed, and raising the specter of North Korea's nuclear, chemical and bacteriological arsenal being on the loose.

Nevertheless, was the fall of the Ceausescu regime in December 1989 a swiftly anarchic process, involving the total collapse of the power structures in Romania? Or were some of the state institutions not only left intact, but also in control

of what, on the surface, appeared to be a sudden, disorderly and bloody collapse of the Ceausescu regime? And what is the applicability of the Romanian experience to possible end-game scenarios in North Korea?

Ceausescu and Kim Il-sung, a "Special Relationship"

Romania's Nicolae Ceausescu ruled the communist country with an iron fist between 1965 and 1989, when a popular anti-communist revolution resulted in his and wife Elena's downfall, military trial, and execution. Beginning in 1971, Ceausescu and North Korea's Kim Il-sung met on several occasions, in Pyongyang and Bucharest, and Ceausescu's reaction to North Korea's surreal personality cult, national-communism, and self-reliance, or Juche philosophy, was love at first sight. He subsequently trampled on the human rights of Romanians with impunity, severely restricted their freedom to travel abroad, and saw the damage caused by a March 1977 7.2 Richter scale earthquake as an opportunity to raze large parts of the capital city of Bucharest, once known as "The Little Paris," and turn it into a Eastern European replica of Pyongyang, a city filled with cold, soulless pharaonic structures and gigantic squares broad enough for hundreds of thousands of worshippers to be forced to gather and venerate the leader, as he was delivering his

seemingly unending speeches boasting Romanian independence from the imperialist powers and heralding the ultimate triumph of the “new socialist man.” Ceausescu borrowed astronomic amounts of money from foreign sources in the 1970s to build a notoriously inefficient industrial sector, the sole purpose of which was to claim self-sufficiency and establish the Romanian brand of *juche*. Toward the late 1980s, Ceausescu managed to repay the entire foreign debt by exporting vast amounts of Romanian consumer goods and drastically curtailing imports, resulting in food and energy shortages that challenged the very survival of average citizens. Life in Romania under Ceausescu was the closest Eastern Europeans ever got to experiencing North Korea up close and personal.

The December 1989 Anti-communist Revolution

Begun with popular unrest in the Southwestern city of Timisoara and further inflamed by the vicious repression by the communist authorities, the December 1989 anti-communist revolution soon spread all over Romania, including the capital city of Bucharest. The downfall of Ceausescu was swift, and, while a popular revolution set in motion the demise of communist dictatorship, what ultimately ensured the success of the popular movement and avoided a colossal bloodbath was a *de facto* coup staged by the Romanian military.

After dozens of protesters were killed on December 16–22, many of them by army bullets, General Vasile Milea, the minister of defense, died of a gunshot wound to the chest, under suspicious circumstances. Ceausescu promptly appointed General Victor Stanculescu as minister of defense, but the general refused to carry out an order issued by Ceausescu, his direct superior as commander-in-chief of the military, to step up the armed repression, and ordered the troops back to their barracks instead. Over the years, it has been debated whether Stanculescu’s decision may have been the result of a pre-existing conspiracy, but ultimately it was the only rational decision under the given circum-

stances, as it avoided escalating the already grim civilian casualty count to unimaginable levels.

A few days after their failed attempt to flee, Ceausescu and his wife were captured and executed by a military firing squad, following trial by an ad-hoc military tribunal. After their attempted escape and even for a few days after their execution, over 1,000 people were killed and over 3,000 wounded during a week of fighting, by rogue snipers acting on some pre-existing guerilla warfare plan or simply aiming to destabilize the country, or by accident, caught in a crossfire. Although the Romanian military was involved in the brutal repression of the popular demonstrations prior to the dictator’s flight, and although many were accidentally shot by the military in the subsequent sporadic fighting, the role of the Romanian military is generally perceived to have been benign, and the anti-communist revolution would certainly have failed if the military had not fraternized with the protesters.

After the *de facto* coup by General Stanculescu and the Romanian military ensured the demise of the Ceausescu regime, the military allowed civilian leadership to take control, beginning in the early stages of the transition. The reasons for the decision not to establish military rule may have included: a genuine belief that the role of the military was not to rule the country, but to support civilian leadership; the close monitoring of developments in Romania by the world press and public opinion, and the very negative perceptions that may have been created by the replacement of one type of dictatorship with another; and last, but not least, the privileged positions made available to former high-ranking military officers in the new government or the opportunities offered to them as the country’s economy was being privatized.

Although its ultimate success was ensured by a *coup d’etat*, the Romanian Revolution and its aftermath were far more complex. A *coup d’etat* rarely results in dramatic systemic change, but remarkable transformation did happen in Romania in the long run. After the events of December 1989, Ro-

mania traversed a difficult transition from national-communism to emerging capitalism. Through a difficult, messy and sometimes violent transition, Romanians ultimately managed to put in place a system that was liberal and democratic, although affected by cronyism and corruption. Ultimately, the transformation begun in December 1989 resulted in a functioning democracy and market economy and Romania's joining the NATO in March 2004 and the EU in January 2007.

What conferred legitimacy upon the Romanian military, allowing it to win the hearts and minds of the anti-communist revolutionaries and become stabilizing force through turbulent times? That legitimacy had been created by the very system the military helped bring down.

Open Access: Military Service, a Shared Ordeal

In communist Romania, time-honored institutions including the monarchy and the multi-party system had been wiped out, and traditional establishments such as the Romanian Orthodox Church were oppressed to the point of extinction. Within a one-party system, the two grand establishments one could join were the communist party and the military. Although by the mid-1980s about 20% of Romanian adults belonged to the communist party, membership was limited, and contingent upon certain conditions. In contrast, all able-bodied men above age 18 were drafted into the military. The Romanian army had around 140,000 personnel in 1989, but close to 100,000 of them were conscripts, undergoing the shortest service of all Warsaw Pact countries, with nine to sixteen months of service, in rare cases twenty-four.

The paramilitary patriotic guard was supposed to include all men under sixty-two and all women under fifty-seven, theoretically incorporating millions, but these were mostly people with full-time jobs, for whom paramilitary training was just a weekend nuisance.

Under the umbrella of the Interior Ministry, the internal security force, or Securitate had over 20,000 troops, most of them also conscripts, and the police, or militia, about 30,000. The only "professional" combat units within the Interior Ministry included about 500 presidential guards and about 800 members of anti-terrorist squads. In 1989 Interior Ministry troops appeared to have insufficient experience in riot control through the use of non-lethal force. The system had relied on a network of informants that ensured that dissent was dealt with swiftly before it could gain momentum to turn into organized rebellion. The sole exceptions had been a coal miner strike in 1977 and a smaller scale rebellion in the city of Brasov in 1987, when a 20,000 strong demonstration had been dispersed with no casualties and only 300 arrests. The indiscriminate use of lethal force by Interior Ministry and Ministry of Defense troops against the initial Timisoara protests in 1989 inflamed the spirits throughout Romania, and may have ultimately resulted in the rapid propagation of the uprising.

Although by comparison to other Eastern Bloc countries military duty was short, the nine to sixteen months of military service were, nonetheless, a rather traumatizing experience, shared by most Romanian men, young and old, college graduates and high school dropouts, urban and rural dwellers. Consequently, the elite mentality of the officer and non-commissioned officer corps, present during pre-communist times, had been significantly diminished, as all of them had begun their military careers as conscripts. Most members of the Romanian military did not view themselves as a group separated from the rest of Romanian society. Rather, conscription and serving in the military were seen as an integral part of the collective ordeal of living under Ceausescu's regime. Additionally, the workforce in rural areas had been depleted, as people had been mobilized to work in the industrial centers or on construction sites. Consequently, military conscripts were often used as forced labor, in agriculture or on the construction sites of Ceausescu's pharaonic projects, including the People's House downtown Bucharest and the Danube-Black

Sea canal, where they worked alongside paid workers, and also convicts. This helped further enhance awareness that the military was a “popular army,” experiencing the same hardship as the rest of Romanians, and not a privileged group that could help crush dissent and maintain the dictator’s grip on power.

The Sole Legitimate Institution

With all other institutions and the multi-party system wiped out, and the Romanian Orthodox Church reduced to irrelevance, the only institutions left were the communist party and the military. While the party was viewed by many as being the root of all evil and Ceausescu’s pawn, the military was perceived as less ideological, possibly with the exception of very high-ranking officers, and thus less responsible for the appalling political oppression and human rights violations, the pharaonic personality cult, and the dramatic food and consumer good shortages. For a long time before the collapse of the Ceausescu regime, many regarded the military as the only benign institution in the communist state, willing and able to fight and defeat the much feared and loathed secret police, the Securitate, which, in its turn, had to depend heavily on conscripts.

National-communism and the Glorification of the Past

In order to solidify his grip on power and further legitimize his rule, Ceausescu employed a type of national-communism bordering chauvinism, very similar to the North Korean view on national history. National history and the tales and images of kings and generals of the past were used to legitimize the dictator’s personality cult, presenting him as the direct descendant of the heroic figures of a glorious past, identified with the struggle for independence against the great empires surrounding the Romanians. Consequently, the communist propaganda presented the military as the one national institution that had always been on the just side of history. The participation of the Romanian military in the Holocaust was conveniently ignored, and

never included in communist history books. Within the national-communist view of history, the military was seen as the protector of national integrity throughout the centuries. This further contributed to enhancing the legitimacy of the military as the one institution that people expected to fill the vacuum left through Ceausescu’s demise.

The Power Cluster

The unprecedented concentration of power in the hands of one man, together with his wife, family, and close collaborators, backed by the secret police, meant that they were the ones to blame for the evil done onto the people during the communist times. Consequently, the second and third tiers of party leadership got away relatively easily, and in many cases managed to turn the transition into very lucrative business.

Although Romanians had been oppressed for decades and had suffered from severe deprivation, the only guarantee they had under Ceausescu was relative peace and order, although often brutally enforced by the communist authorities. What this also meant was that, in the sudden power vacuum left by the disappearance of Ceausescu, people felt disoriented, and desperate to see order restored. As thousands of workers were marching on Ceausescu’s palace, some of them were chanting “monarchy,” and others “military dictatorship.” This feeling of great disorientation was further exacerbated by the semblance of a civil war, being fought for a few days on the streets of many Romanian cities. Under those circumstances, the one institution that was seen as possibly filling that vacuum and restoring peace and order was the military. The Romanian army was the only institution able to deliver, to restore order by removing the disorder it had itself created to a certain extent, thus providing the security necessary during the difficult early days of post-Ceausescu civilian rule. In the early days of the transition, people were rather short-sighted, focusing less on democratic change and more on improvement of their living standards. This enabled the National Salvation Front to assume control, al-

though it was composed mostly of characters from the old regime.

What about North Korea?

In early January 2009, tens of thousands of North Koreans gathered in Pyongyang's main square to express their support for Kim Jong-il's New Year policies of further bolstering the country's military. Editorials in North Korea's three main state-run papers emphasized the *songun chongchi*, or military first policy, at a time of enhanced tension with South Korea. Only a few days before, in late December 2008, the South Korean press quoted experts including Mr. Cheong Seong-chang, director of Inter-Korean Relations Studies Program at the Sejong Institute, who dismissed the possibility of a popular revolt or any type of "significant upturn triggered by the military" in North Korea, due mainly to the tight control exercised by Kim Jong-il and an elite group within the Workers' Party over the people and military. According to such analysis, authority in North Korea centers around the Workers' Party, rather than the military, overseen by the National Defense Commission, and military commanders are not allowed to congregate even in groups of three or four. Does this preclude a Romanian-style scenario from happening in North Korea?

To what extent could the Romanian experience be repeated in North Korea? In North Korea, in similar fashion, but to a far greater extent than in Romania, previously existing institutions and traditions were completely wiped out. Kim Il-sung decided to abolish even the traditional Korean holidays of Chuseok (Thanksgiving) and Seollal (Lunar New Year)—both traditions revisited under Kim Jong-il, though—and the "eternal president" Kim Il-sung assumed absolute power, subsequently inherited by his son, Kim Jong-il. Membership in the Workers' Party is even more restrictive than it used to be in Romania, and the overwhelming majority of the North Korean people do not have access to the advantages bestowed upon the upper echelons of the Korean Workers' Party. The pop-

ulation of North Korea is just about the same as Romania in 1989, 23 million, but its armed forces have ten times more people. The 1.2 million strong Korean People's Army is the one institution that offers open access through the compulsory military service for both men and women between ages 17 and 49, for 10 and 7 years, respectively. While this provides a basis for the regimentation of North Korean society, it also raises the question whether the members of the KPA see themselves as a separate category, or merely as a popular army.

After his father died in 1994 and he assumed leadership of North Korea, in addition to purging elements and factions that may have posed a threat to his rule, Kim Jong-il decided to shift authority away from the Korean Workers' Party, toward the Korean People's Army, making sure that his regime's legitimacy, safety and sovereignty rested on the military, rather than the party, as had been the case during his father's rule. This shift was completed at the 10th Supreme People's Assembly in 1998, when the National Defense Commission was invested with supreme decision making authority over the KWP.

Dissent at the top or within the military ranks may seem unlikely for as long as Kim Jong-il is in power, given the authority he seems to wield, in particular after the establishment of the military first policy after his father's death. However, previous reports of a couple of failed attempted coups in the early to mid-1990s indicate that the North Korean military has not always thought favorably of hereditary succession. In a post-Kim Jong-il scenario, developments may unravel in a way reminiscent of Romania 1989. In North Korea, as was the case in Romania, dissent is dealt with promptly and brutally, without allowing the opportunity for larger groups of protesters to gather. North Korean security forces lack sufficient experience in employing non-lethal means to control crowds, and any larger protest will require the use of the military for riot control. Very much like the Romanian generals in December 1989, the members of North Korea's National Defense Commission may one day be

presented with the option of disobeying a direct order received from the Chairman or acting Chairman of the National Defense Commission, while maintaining the rest of the chain of command intact, thus ensuring the needed patronage for further transformation. As was the case in Romania, broad conscription and the central role assigned to the military in the national-communist view of history, enhanced by the authority further conferred by the songun chongchi may grant the North Korean military the legitimacy to be the decisive factor in a post Kim Jong-il transition.

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