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Kim Il Sung's Land Reform After 75 Years. The Grandson Should Bring It Back.

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On March 5th, amid worrisome signs of food shortages in North Korea, especially a jump in the price of cornⁱ, the official North Korean news service published an interesting one-sentence item on the country's land reform history, catching my attention.

“Agrarian Reform in Liberated Korea. Pyongyang, March 5, (KCNA) -- As the first work for democratic reforms in Korea after its liberation from Japan's colonial rule, the agrarian reform was successfully enforced under the wise guidance of President Kim Il Sung to realize the centuries-old desire of the peasants.”ⁱⁱ

KCNA doesn't exaggerate. The very first law passed by Kim's newly Soviet installed government 75 years ago, on March 6, 1946, did exactly that, a massive, historic, and arguably positive land-reform act. South Korea, under US guidance, soon followed suit just as Japan and Taiwan were experiencing US-sponsored reforms of archaic Asian tenancy systems. China would follow a few years later, by murdering hundreds of thousands of landlords. But I was looking for KCNA to give the rest of the thought. Just what was the centuries-old desire of the peasants was Kim referring to?

The law itself, and Kim Il Sung's analysis of it in his epochal **Kim Il Sung's Works, 1960** spell it out. The peasants wanted to own the land they tilled. In Kim's own words, as translated by the official press:

“The aim of agrarian reform is to abolish the land ownership of the Japanese and Korean landlords and the tenant system. The right to use the land belongs to those who till it. The agricultural system of north Korea will depend on the peasant economy which is the private ownership of the peasants who are not held in bondage to the landlords.”ⁱⁱⁱ

I might want to say AMEN. The act, which includes the words “in perpetuity” was transformative, to say the least. A registry was set up and soon 750,000 northern tenant farmers were given the land. It gave the new Kim government credibility among the huge rural population and ensured the establishment of the DPRK, two years later. And as such movements go, this one was easy. Much of the land had been owned by Japanese who had fled to their homeland, and by Korean landlords who were fleeing south, given what they knew happened to land-owners when Soviet Communists took over. Kim remarked on several occasions that he was proud he didn't have to buy the land from the previous owners, he just took it, unlike the American sponsored reforms.

Private ownership of land continued through the Korean War but soon afterwards, collectivization began and by 1958, all land had been taken from their owners and put into large collectives, averaging 300 farms encompassing several villages each. Even the Soviet advisors thought this went too far too

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fast. The regime said the takeover was voluntary but state restrictions on prices and delivery of fertilizer and irrigation gave indebted farmers no choice. At first collectivization seemed to work and grain output, at least rice and corn, rose rapidly. Mechanization was improved by the economies of scale provided by the large farms and big Japanese built fertilizer plants, re-built after the war, and expanded by Soviet bloc aid, and later by French investments, helped. Red flag tractors replaced the cows.

Kim often said that collectivization happened because they needed to improve efficiency; that the small farms were unproductive, not because of the socialist imperative of public ownership of the means of production. In his iconic 1972 meeting with South Korea's famed CIA boss, Lee Hu-rak, during which the two protagonists discussed unification of the two economies, Kim suggested that he could accommodate the South Korean system; that collectivization was not that big a deal. He had done it in the North only for efficiency's sake, not following the Soviet (or later Chinese) examples where the landlords were murdered.

Lee, in retirement, later told me, a young American^{iv} diplomat, he had been tricked by Kim and warned no one should travel to Pyongyang and expect not to be bamboozled. But fifty years after their buttery discussion of tame socialism, it is clear North Korea's collectives fail Kim's own efficiency test. Output per farmer, despite hard work and the relatively high human and physical capital of the country, is among the lowest in the world and the people, already having suffered a catastrophic famine, continue to face malnutrition and rising corn prices--the "hunger problem" often mentioned by Kim Jong Un.

Some years ago, I asked China's secretive North Korea watchers in the *Reform Forum*, an intelligence services think tank, why North Korea didn't follow Deng Xiao Ping's path allowing private farming. They said they had the same question and had just decided Koreans were "better communists than we are".

This past Sunday, March 7th, KCNA ran another piece on the country's preparations for spring planting. Kim Il Sung's proud chemical fertilizer plants in Hamhung and Anju are no longer working properly, and the country is short of fuel and electricity to power obsolete and broken equipment. The tractor plant now makes tanks, and the cows are back, eating the corn. From South Hwanghai, the breadbasket of the country:

"Authorities are energetically supporting the socialist collective farms. Several days ago, factories and enterprises under the control of the province transported plenty of urban manure to the fields of its cooperative farms with 100-odd autotrucks. The city and counties of the province accelerate the production and transport of their manure in full swing".^v

Urban manure? I think you know what that means.

Maybe it is time for Kim Jong Un to resurrect his grandfather's 1946 law and give the land back to the farmers. This time in perpetuity. Their self-reliance is at stake.

ⁱ [North Korean corn prices skyrocket to levels unseen since currency reform in 2009 - Daily NK](#)

ⁱⁱ Korea Data History Initiative, a new service from Johns Hopkins School of Advanced international Studies, March 6, 2021. kdhinews@gmail.com.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kim Il Sung's Works, Vol. 2, p. 93, Pyongyang, 1960. As found in Wilson Center's Cold War History Project.

^{iv} North Korea's Foreign Economic Relations, Wilson Center Cold War Project, May 2015, p. 19

^v Korea Data History Initiative, a new service from Johns Hopkins School of Advanced international Studies, March 7, 2021. kdhinews@gmail.com.