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McEACHERN, Patrick (2010). *Inside the Red Box: North Korea's Post-totalitarian Politics*. Columbia University Press. 320 pp. ISBN 978-0-231-15322-5.

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Tento článek podléhá autorským právům, kopírování a využívání jeho obsahu bez řádného odkazování na něj je považováno za plagiátorství a podléhá sankcím dle platné legislativy.

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McEACHERN, Patrick (2010). *Inside the Red Box: North Korea's Post-totalitarian Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press. 320 pp. ISBN 978-0-231-15322-5. Price 24.50 USD.

Inside the Red Box adds another title to a group of studies primarily aimed at uncovering the internal workings of the regime under Kim Chŏng-il.¹ Patrick McEachern's particular focus is on the analysis of documents from 1998 to 2009 in order to provide international audiences with a variety of new insights (pp. 17, 224–238). His central claim is perfectly clear from the outset. McEachern's "revised understanding" (p. 2) is that the current status of the North is not that of a "totalitarian monolith" but of "a more decentralized, post-totalitarian, institutionally plural state" (p. 13). The regime is described in terms of "post-totalitarian institutionalism" and operates on the basis of a more plural interaction of "three peer institutions", which have their own distinct interests, coherent policies and limited autonomy. In this narrative the Party, military and cabinet "compete for influence", providing for "a certain type of internal governmental checks and balances" (p. 34). In short, each institution of the trio is allegedly a coherent, semi-autonomous or quasi-independent group, influencing both policy decisions and implementation in a significant manner (p. 50).

The book under review appeared in December 2010 as a slightly updated version of McEachern's dissertation of May 2009.² In the summer of 2008, the author,

still referring to a black box, spelled out his core argument and it has since remained unchanged.³ The book, therefore, reflects the general mood of analytical studies from the mid-2000s, which are well represented in Mansourov's paper "Inside North Korea's Black Box: Reversing the Optics."⁴ In contrast to other works, McEachern does not simply identify the cracks in the North Korean totalitarian regime; he actually goes a step further in providing the reader with an unambiguous argument that the current regime is post-totalitarian. If proved, this small step would be a giant leap forward for the majority of North Koreans. I am afraid, however, that this is not the case at the moment, and never has been.

It is unfortunate that the study is not able to benefit from a greater degree of reflection vis-à-vis the most recent events, as these developments, observable since at least 2004, have consistently signaled that the totalitarian regime – after a protracted crisis – is in the process of a reequilibration

Dissertation Collection, <http://etd.lsu.edu/docs/available/etd-04142009-234949/unrestricted/McEachern_diss.pdf> [downloaded March 8, 2011].

³ See McEACHERN, Patrick (2008). "Interest Groups in North Korean Politics." In *Journal of East Asian Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2, p. 256; and (2009). "North Korea's Policy Process: Assessing Institutional Policy Preferences." In *Asian Survey*, Vol. 49, No. 3, pp. 528–552.

⁴ Alexandre Y. Mansourov's paper appears in OH HASSIG, Kongdan et al. *North Korean Policy Elites*, [IDA Paper P-3903, Alexandria: Institute for Defense Analyses, June 2004], <<http://www.brookings.edu/views/papers/fellows/oh20040601.pdf>> [downloaded April 30, 2009].

¹ I strictly adhere to the McCune-Reischauer system of Romanization, except for citations.

² McEACHERN, Patrick. "Inside the Red Box: North Korea's Post-Totalitarian Politics." PhD diss., Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, May 2009. In LSU Electronic Thesis and

and this seems to defy McEachern's "new model", together with his core argument concerning the post-totalitarian nature of the red box. Undoubtedly, the author's understanding is revisionist but primarily because of his deemphasizing of the role of a number of substantial elements, such as the importance of ideology or the nature of the control and mobilization apparatus. Instead, he overemphasizes some of the secondary areas: both international and economic. This is probably the most critical shortcoming of the study, arising as it does from McEachern's pluralist-like preconceptions, as well as from his research design which aims at exploring official documents.

The author sets forth several ambitious objectives; too many to provide a thorough account of all of them here. One such objective is to analyze "general lessons for foreign-policy practitioners" in the light of his revised understanding (p. 17). In spite of placing this issue last on his list, the international realm actually consumes most attention throughout the text and is the most successful part, containing many valuable insights. However, one may question whether the revised understanding is actually necessary for the conclusions that McEachern reaches. On the contrary, the author's judgments on international affairs seem, indeed, to contradict it! He correctly emphasizes, for instance, that the sunshine policy demonstrates how the North "could continually pocket South Korean concessions and respond by asking more rather than offering something in return." When concluding this paragraph, McEachern states: "The cabinet is ... a hardened arm of the regime used to maximize its advantage" (p. 229). According to my reading, this assertion deprives the cabinet of its

semi-autonomous status. In spite of previous arguments concerning the cabinet's quasi-independent and coherent foreign policies, the cabinet becomes merely a tool for attaining the regime's objectives. This is a significantly more accurate reading of the current totalitarian "red box" than a partial pluralist view of post-totalitarianism with significant competitive institutions, although looking into specific elements of the regime is a legitimate and valuable undertaking under certain conditions.

Over the years, our author's interests have moved from international affairs (McEachern's major field of study) towards comparative politics (his minor field) and domestic issues.⁵ However, as a U.S. government North Korea analyst, as well as a service officer supporting the Six Party Talks from Seoul, his preoccupation has continued to remain with diplomacy. The dual profession is like a double-edged sword. It has both merits and demerits. On many occasions, the book benefits from the author's experience in dealing with a large amount of information surrounded by rather biased assessments or outspoken propaganda declarations. Any attempt to view the political regime under scrutiny in rational terms is undoubtedly worthy of praise. McEachern shows that there are more untapped scholarly resources than is usually supposed, that the North is not

⁵ The earliest work available is McEACHERN, Patrick (2003). "Towards a Multilateral Missile Defense Regime," a paper presented at the European Union Studies Association 2003 Annual Conference, Nashville, Tennessee, March 28, 2003. In *Archive of European Integration* (AEI), <<http://aei.pitt.edu/2895/>> [downloaded April 5, 2011]. Another more recent work is McEACHERN, Patrick (2009). "Benchmarks of Economic Reform in North Korea." In *Korea Yearbook 2008* (Leiden), Vol. 2, pp. 231–250.

as unknowable and irrational as presented by many and that it pays to study the regime's internal workings in greater detail (pp. 11–13). He is obviously aware of the North's past peculiarities, while seeking to concentrate on its current developments, and is usually adept at avoiding unreasonable clichés, such as the one about the Confucian cultural foundations of the current communist system. The opposing edge of the double-profession shows its dangerous quality when McEachern deals with his minor field of study. Among the key objectives the author sets forth, his ambition to bridge the gap between comparative and area studies literature by his own unique contribution seems most appealing at the outset of the study (p. 19). It quickly turns out, however, that the methodological design and scope of the study are obviously not suited to the achievement of this objective. The book can hardly be regarded as being truly comparative.

The study under review opens with a long prologue, accounting for a half of the book. Chapters 1 and 2 ("Introduction" and "Post-totalitarian Institutionalism", pp. 1–50) are best understood as a comparative politics introductory section, while chapters 3 and 4 ("Historical Context" and "North Korea's Political Institutions", pp. 51–99) serve as an area studies overview, introducing the basics of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The subsequent three chapters (pp. 100–214) are the core of the study and are intended as an empirical test of McEachern's "model". Unfortunately, the elaboration of these three parts is very uneven in terms of content, depth or method and gives the impression that the book is rather a set of disparate articles rather than a consistent monograph.

The painstaking efforts which are made to present official accounts related to international and economic matters in a highly descriptive way within the core of the study contrast all too sharply with the preceding two sections, which provide general information, often at the expense of quality and depth. Therefore, one might gain the impression that the overview of competing models and North Korea's past serve only as a pretext, not having a great deal of relevance to the overflow of details presented in the core section. The last chapter ("Conclusion", pp. 215–252) concentrates on a reassessment of three important issues, asking whether McEachern's "new model" fits the data better than the competing models; it explores the effect of the model on our general understanding of authoritarian regimes and on the general lessons for foreign-policy practitioners (p. 17).

In line with his revised understanding, the author believes that "the official media has been increasingly used under Kim Jong Il to reveal policy preferences and foster limited forms of debates" (p. 42). Therefore, the core of the study is based on a content analysis (in English translation) of North Korean texts in order to track policy positions of each of the three allegedly competing semi-autonomous institutions. This is undertaken in chronological order. The author's explanation of his preference for translated materials is reasonable but this approach excludes the possibility of deciphering more important between-the-lines messages. Corresponding with his institutional triad, McEachern identifies three key newspapers: the army's *Chosŏn Inmin-gun*, the Party's *Rodong Sinmun* and the cabinet's *Minju Chosŏn* (pp. 45–46). One would expect that the study would track

the differences in coherent policies within the three semi-autonomous institutions, as reflected in their respective newspapers, but, surprisingly, this is not the case. The author simply states that “The Korean People’s Army *Choson Inmingun* is not available outside of North Korea” (p. 45) and the Party’s *Rodong Sinmun* serves as a primary reference point throughout the text. In line with McEachern’s argument, it is difficult to grasp the logic as to why the cabinet’s coherent policies, for instance, should be consistently reflected in the press mouthpiece of its alleged competitor.

In the first part of the study McEachern self-consciously asserts: “I lay out my theoretical model, explaining why the state evolved from its totalitarian origins and how the system consequently functions today” (p. 16). If one takes the time to ponder what the allegedly new dynamic and functional model is, one might be relieved to learn that it is not a model in the proper sense of the word, but a concept. Under closer examination, it turns out that the novelty is hardly distinguishable from other well-known attempts to infuse pluralism and interest groups into studies on post-Stalin communist politics.⁶ Beginning with “Existing Models of North

Korean Politics” (pp. 20–26), McEachern briefly summarizes selected concepts of nondemocratic regimes: totalitarianism, post-totalitarianism, personalism (i.e. sultanism) and (neosocialist) corporatism. The first three, together with authoritarianism, are concepts elaborated by Juan J. Linz,⁷ while the latter is best understood as one of the successor concepts of totalitarianism discussed in Giovanni Sartori’s insightful but neglected paper.⁸ McEachern further discusses “institutional pluralism” and its brotherly “groups” (meaning Skilling’s interest groups) to arrive at a model of “post-totalitarian institutionalism” (p. 30). He not only believes that his “model” may provide a better explanation and improve prediction of North Korean actions, which are in his view perceived as perplexing under the existing, outdated or erroneous “monolithic models”, but also argues that it “offers critical insight into a wider group of authoritarian regimes” (p. 15).

The first critical note concerns the lack of proper conceptualization. Apart from the terms listed above, McEachern does not waste time on elaborating other, more frequented concepts (e.g. system, regime, state, leadership, inner circle, authoritarianism). In contrast to Linz, for instance, the author employs authoritarianism as a generic term, not as a specific term reserved for one subtype of dictatorship. The second problem is McEachern’s inappropriate handling of a concept as a misconceived

⁶ A pluralist view is presented by HOUGH, Jerry F. (1972). “The Soviet System: Petrification or Pluralism?” In *Problems of Communism*, Vol. 21, No. 2, pp. 25–45. The concept of interest groups brings in, for instance, SKILLING, H. Gordon and GRIFFITHS, Franklyn (1971). *Interest Groups in Soviet Politics*. Princeton: Princeton UP. Apt criticism of these views is provided by ODOM, William E. (1976). “A Dissenting View on the Group Approach to Soviet Politics.” In *World Politics*, Vol. 28, No. 4, pp. 542–567, and GROTH, Alexander J. (1979). “USSR: Pluralist Monolith?” In *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 9, No. 4, pp. 445–464.

⁷ LINZ, Juan J. and STEPAN, Alfred C. (1996). *Problems of Democratic Transitions and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins UP, pp. 38–54.

⁸ SARTORI, Giovanni (1993). “Totalitarianism, Model Mania and Learning from Error.” In *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, Vol. 5, No. 1, esp. pp. 11–13.

model. Although, it is positive that he does not dismiss totalitarianism as a useful category, he nevertheless fails to differentiate properly between totalitarianism as an ideal-type and as an empirical-type. Similarly, McEachern's insistence on the monolithic and static nature of totalitarianism is not only misplaced but also very surprising because he actually cites the very apt criticism of this misunderstanding: "Power is diffuse even in concentration camps... The major question ... is how power is diffused" (p. 30). The third critical point concerns the measurement of the regime's changes. McEachern correctly points out that the regime under Kim Chŏng-il is different from that under Kim Il-sŏng (specified as totalitarianism between 1956 and 1990, p. 52). To prove this claim, however, it would be necessary to conduct a diachronic comparison. It is possible to employ existing strategies. The one, proposed by Sartori in the above mentioned paper, enables us to map changes within North Korea's totalitarianism and to conclude whether it has changed significantly enough to argue that it has moved into the post-totalitarian cell. One necessary precondition is that we have yardsticks to measure such changes. Unfortunately, McEachern does not set out any benchmarks of this kind. Therefore, chapters 3 and 4 merely outline the political history of North Korea after World War II and describe its political institutions in a very formal manner.

In the subsequent three chapters (pp. 100–214), the author examines the North's recent history and actions in chronological order: "institutional jostling for agenda control" (1998–2001), "segmenting policy and issue linkages" (2001–2006), and "policy reversals" (2006–2008). In order to

select relevant documents to analyze, the author has previously established "strategic issue areas" (p. 43), i.e. key priorities the central leadership arguably deems to be most important: "anti-imperialism, reunification, and domestic ideological and economic concerns." I cannot help but count four – 1) the US with its imperialist gang; 2) the specific relationship with the Republic of Korea, 3) ideology and internal control, and 4) the economy – but McEachern asserts: "these three issues are paramount in Kim Jong Il's DPRK" (p. 43). Unfortunately, this calculation (which skips no. 3) seems to be in line with the author's preconceived picture of the "red box". Partly, this is also an effect of his methodical decision to follow the official narrative only. This leads to an overemphasis on international (no. 1 and 2) and economic aspects (no. 4), while neglecting (no. 3) substantial elements of the North Korean regime. For better or worse, the real picture of any totalitarian regime and its machinery – together with its ideology, fear, penetration, pervasiveness, etc. – projects itself into everyday life and only seldom appears in a directly outspoken form. Similarly, on an institutional level, the cabinet's role – which is in my view comparatively negligible – is overemphasized, while the role of the real players (including the elites and an "inner circle", the security services and even the National Defense Commission) is outside the scope of the study.

Chapter 8 concludes by answering three central questions. One of these is to assess whether the presented "model fits the data better than existing models" (p. 17). It is worth asking: What kind of data? McEachern, unfortunately, concentrates on data which do indeed fit with his par-

tial methodological view and, as a consequence, heavily distort the final picture of the “red box”, leading to untenable results about its post-totalitarian nature. In other words, the data he presents do not support his claim that “North Korea moved away from its totalitarian past” in all of the five core areas he outlined at the beginning: the predomination of all-encompassing ideology, the use of arbitrary terror to maintain obedience, the media monopolized by the state, the state command economy and the Korean Worker’s Party’s control of the government and military (p. 31). The first two are barely discussed and, in fact, McEachern illustrates a change only in the case of the latter item; unfortunately, not in its entirety and full complexity. It is indeed true to say that the military’s role has increased and that of the Party has decreased but I would argue that the National Defense Commission has assumed the overarching position instead. In short, the most serious shortcoming of the whole study is the malpractice of “affirming by omitting”, against which Sartori warned.⁹

To sum up, McEachern provides the reader with several valuable insights into North Korea’s international affairs and some interesting details on the debates within the current political regime. As a whole, however, the study is not particularly well conceived and executed. It is free of bias in relation to ideological value but, instead, suffers from spuriousness and selection biases arising from the author’s methodological outlook. Overall, the study fails either to meet the challenges inherent in the topic or to match the objectives outlined by the author himself. After consider-

ing other publications of the Columbia University Press, such as Noland and Haggard’s book on North Korea,¹⁰ the reader would rightly expect more from the Publisher. As long as he does not allow himself to be constrained by a misconceived model and by the pressing agenda of the day, Patrick McEachern, a young and diligent scholar, obviously has great potential for materializing his knowledge and abilities into a truly comparative study. I look forward to reading his future analytical studies.

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⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁰ HAGGARD, Stephan and NOLAND, Marcus (2007). *Famine in North Korea: Markets, Aid, and Reform*. New York: Columbia UP.

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