

Diary: “Forty-two years ago, I was mysteriously invited to visit North Korea...”

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Tariq Ali recalls extracts from his *Diary* about North Korea. The full article is below.

Forty-two years ago, I was mysteriously invited to visit North Korea. Pakistan’s military dictatorship had been toppled after a three-month struggle and in March 1970 the country was in the throes of its first ever general election campaign. I was travelling to every major town and many smaller ones, interviewing opposition politicians and those who’d taken part in the uprising for a book. I was still there in May, my work unfinished, when the invitation arrived. North Korea was even then a country set apart.

The letter came via a local Communist known as Rahim ‘Koreawallah’, secretary of the Pak-Korea Friendship Society. Short, paunchy, loquacious and full of beer, he was out of breath as he handed me the letter from Pyongyang. I had to leave straightaway, he said. Why? Because the North Koreans were convinced that the US was preparing to invade and needed global solidarity. In January 1968 the Koreans had captured the USS Pueblo, a naval intelligence vessel, and arrested its crew. Relations between the two countries remained poor. Could I leave next week, Koreawallah asked? I laughed and said no.

I was on my way to what was then East Pakistan. North Korea was a distraction. Koreawallah was both angry and insistent, but his argument was weak. There was no evidence that Washington was preparing for war. I had experience to back me up. A few years earlier I had spent six weeks in North Vietnam and, as well as crouching in air-raid shelters during US bombing raids on Hanoi, I sat through several military briefings by senior Vietnamese officers who made it clear that they would eventually win the war. For the Americans, already overstretched in Indochina, a new war in Korea would be suicidal.

I had other reasons not to go. I thought Kim Il-sung a ridiculous and abhorrent leader, his regime a parody of Stalinist Russia. I turned down the offer again, this time more forcefully. But my parents, both of them Communists, thought I should take advantage of the opportunity to see the country (they had never been). And Koreawallah would not be deterred. With a sly smile, he let drop that I could go via China, taking a train from Beijing to Pyongyang. That decided the matter. I was desperate to visit Beijing and this seemed my only chance. I just said I couldn’t go until mid-June.

When I returned to Dhaka after two gruelling weeks in the countryside, a problem had arisen. The East Pakistan trade unions had called a one-day general strike - a show of strength against General Yahya Khan’s transitional regime in Islamabad - on the day I was due to get an early morning flight from Dhaka to Canton. I took it personally. Friends asked the Communist leaders of the taxi and rickshaw drivers’ unions for a 30-minute exemption so I could get to the airport. Their pleas were

rightly rejected. When the local student leaders stepped in, the unions relented. There could be no motorised traffic on the streets, but I could travel by cycle rickshaw.

My suitcase and I were too much for the emaciated driver. After ten minutes of huffing and puffing we'd got nowhere. Worried I might miss the flight, I asked him to get in the back and pedalled like crazy for the five or so miles to the airport. Apart from stray animals, there was nothing else on the road. When we got to the airport the rickshaw-wallah, seeing me bathed in sweat, grinned broadly and refused to accept my money. I stuffed it down his dry vest and ran to the plane. Soon after it took off, the strike committees closed down the airport. I had predicted that Pakistan was about to break up but I didn't think as I watched the morning sun rise over the paddy fields that it would be my last glimpse of East Pakistan.

In Beijing posters decorated the streets, loud music blared from speakers and groups of children bowed before portraits of the Great Helmsman. A stream of bicycles flowed along unpolluted thoroughfares. How lucky they were, I thought, not to fetishise the car. I wandered away from the hotel, managed to find Tiananmen Square, discovered a cheap and good restaurant, then headed back to the hotel, where two Korean Embassy officials were waiting to take me on a low-key tour of the Forbidden City. We appeared to be the only foreign visitors.

Later that afternoon, I packed for the two-day train journey to Pyongyang and we set off for the station. There was no phrasebook in the hotel. The only Chinese I knew was 'Mao Chushi Wansui' - 'Mao Zedong will live ten thousand years' - which wasn't much help in ordering a meal or finding the lavatory. Mercifully a Sikh courier from the Indian Embassy came into my compartment before the train left the station. By chance, I think. After we had exchanged greetings in Punjabi he told me he was fluent in Mandarin and, much more important, that his wife had cooked food for the journey and he hoped I would share it.

Just before the train began to move, two PLA officers also entered the compartment. No, they laughed, they were not going to Pyongyang. My efforts to draw out their thoughts on the Cultural Revolution failed, but they were eager to discuss Pakistan and surprised to hear my criticism of its military dictators: Chinese propaganda portrayed them as 'anti-imperialist allies'. They hadn't heard about the recent uprising. The jollier of the two warned me about the 'personality cult' in Korea and my Sikh friend roared: he never stayed more than a night at the embassy in Pyongyang. The PLA men got off at Beidaihe, a seaside resort east of Beijing. Once frequented by emperors, their wives and concubines, it had become a favourite spot for Communist Party leaders. 'If these two are holidaying here,' my fellow traveller muttered, 'they must be important or related to someone who is, just like in our part of the world.' Unlike me, he found this thought reassuring.

Colonised by the Japanese between 1910, when they annexed the country, and the end of the Second World War, Korea experienced both 'modernity' and extreme brutality and repression. The country's mineral wealth was used to buttress Japanese militarism; local workers were paid starvation wages; tens of thousands of women were treated as prostitutes by the occupiers but not paid for their services. The Japanese aimed at total integration: Korean was forbidden in schools, Korean-language newspapers were banned and people were to use Japanese names. Agriculture met imperial needs - thousands of farmers were expelled from the land and the bulk of the rice and wheat produced was sent to Japan - leading to mass starvation. A Japanese proconsul admitted that every spring half of Korea's farmers lived off grass and bark. The two million Koreans transported to Japan as slave labourers were lucky in one sense: they were fed.

All this, unsurprisingly, led the Koreans to develop strong nationalist feelings, though fear limited the number who joined clandestine groups. Indigenous Communists were active in these groups: they worked alongside the nationalists and were widely seen as heroic figures. During the Second

World War a resistance movement gradually took shape, at its strongest in the South. Its members – students, intellectuals and peasants – faced the usual penalties of occupation: torture, rape, mass killings and burial in unmarked graves.

The defeat of Japan in 1945 was greeted joyously, and popular committees sprang up in a number of cities. The future of Korea wasn't discussed at Yalta where the division of Europe was decided, but Moscow and Washington privately agreed on a similar division of the Korean peninsula. The Red Army marched into North Korea, with Kim Il-sung reportedly in one of its tanks; the United States took the South. General MacArthur flew into Seoul with a valuable piece of hand luggage: Syngman Rhee. Rhee had little support, however, so MacArthur used the Korean members of the Japanese Occupation Army to keep control of the new state. This in itself was enough to alienate the people. Dissent was crushed, people were imprisoned en masse, Communists and anti-American nationalists were disappeared or openly assassinated. 'The jails in Seoul are overcrowded with political prisoners,' Frank Baldwin, an adviser at the US Embassy, reported:

Six weeks ago I inspected a police jail in Inchon. The prisoners there were living under conditions which I hesitate to describe in this letter. It reminds you of a sense of the Divina Commedia. Goya could have painted what we saw there. What is going to happen to the almost 10,000 political prisoners in case the capital is to be surrendered? It is hard to imagine the acts of vengeance and hatred which people will commit if they survive the conquest of Seoul by their 'liberators'.

The involvement of the US and the Soviet Union had put an end to any chance of Korean autonomy, but Soviet prestige was still high and many believed that the Russians would help liberate and reform the whole country. Few believed partition was permanent. Kim Il-sung, installed as leader of the People's Committee by the Soviets, was barely known, but local Communists had no reason to doubt him.

Growing popular anger in the South and an overwhelming desire for reunification triggered the invasion of the South by the North in 1950. Lacking popular support, the Rhee government collapsed and had to be rescued by US troops. The Soviet Union boycotted a Security Council session at which they could have vetoed America's war, conducted under the UN flag. The Chinese revolution had panicked Washington. It couldn't be allowed to spread.

US troops and their allies (including the Japanese navy) pushed the North Korean army back. The Chinese revolution was less than a year old and its leaders saw the war in Korea as an attempt to reverse events in China. A Politburo meeting determined to save the Koreans. Chinese troops under the command of General Peng Dehuai crossed the Yalu River in droves. The Americans and their allies were driven back to the 38th parallel. General MacArthur declared that it might be necessary to nuke Chinese air bases; Truman sacked him. In 1953 a truce was signed at Panmunjom on the 38th parallel. Around a million soldiers and two million civilians had died (there are many different estimates). One of them was Mao's oldest and favourite son.

Twenty years later I was about to cross the Yalu River on a Chinese train. At Sinuiju, I was welcomed onto the sacred soil of the DPRK with a bunch of flowers. Standing in front of a life-size statue of Kim Il-sung, my host told me that he was a bit disturbed by the scale of the personality cult in China. In Pyongyang a Young Pioneer gave me another bouquet of flowers. I was shocked at what I saw as we drove through the city: we could have been in Eastern Europe after the Second World War. Then I remembered that what General Curtis LeMay had threatened to do to North Vietnam had already been done to North Korea: it had been bombed into the Stone Age. There were no protests in the West against the heavy bombing of Pyongyang at only 15 minutes' notice: 697 tons of bombs were dropped on the city, 10,000 litres of napalm; 62,000 rounds were used for 'strafing at low level'.

Three years earlier in Phnom Penh the Australian journalist Wilfred Burchett had told me that what I had seen in Vietnam was 'nothing compared to what they did to Korea. I was there. There were only two buildings left standing in Pyongyang.' It was alleged that the US had used germ warfare, and although the US dismissed these claims as 'outrageous', on 9 August 1970 the New York Times reported that chemical weapons had been considered after 'American ground forces in Korea were overwhelmed by Chinese Communist human wave attacks near the Yalu River'. Pentagon policymakers wanted to 'find a way to stop mass infantry attacks', so 'the army dug into captured Nazi chemical warfare documents describing sarin, a nerve gas so lethal that a few pounds could kill thousands of people in minutes if the deadly material were disbursed effectively.' Was it used in Korea? Probably not, though germ warfare tests were conducted in US cities. In one test 'harmless' bacteria were introduced into the Pentagon's air-conditioning system.

I asked to see the foreign minister to discuss the tensions with the United States, but, to my minders' surprise, I didn't ask to meet Kim Il-sung. My first few days in Pyongyang were spent visiting museums with my excellent interpreter and a minder - 'the chief of protocol'. They both accompanied me everywhere. At the war museum I asked why there was no sign of the Chinese 'volunteers' without whom the war would have been lost. No reply. Finally the guide went upstairs and returned with the museum director. I repeated my question. 'We did have the display but those rooms have been closed for repairs and painting. The photographs have been removed to safe places.' I asked to see where they had been, but the men's embarrassment was so painful I gave up. We moved on to the museum of art. After seeing four rooms filled with bad paintings of Kim Il-sung, his mother and other relatives, I lost my cool and asked to see something from earlier centuries. After a hurried consultation with my minder, the director asked us to follow him, making it clear that he was doing me a huge favour.

Locked away in the underground vaults were the most stunning tomb paintings I have ever seen. Some dated back two thousand years, others were from the 11th and 12th centuries. They depicted soldiers, hunters, scenes of wealth, exquisitely beautiful women. I thanked the director profusely and said I hoped that Koreans would one day be able to see these treasures. He smiled and shrugged. He was the only person I met there who didn't mention Kim Il-sung once, let alone refer to him as the 'great and beloved leader' - GBL - of 40 million Korean people. One day I was driven to Mangyongdae, where I was promised a real treat. It turned out to be Kim's birthplace and virtually the whole city was a shrine to him, with all the same stories I had heard dozens of times about his heroism repeated yet again.

Back at the hotel I saw a very pregnant Kathleen Cleaver in the lobby with Maceo, her son with the Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver. We spoke briefly before she was whisked away and I never caught sight of her again. Later I discovered that her husband had met Kim Il-sung and pledged the support of the Black Panther Party. That no money changed hands in return for this is inconceivable. American friends told me afterwards that Kathleen had been kept in her room in Pyongyang for four months, a punishment her husband had decreed after discovering that the baby wasn't his. Kim had obliged his new friend. Useful to know, I thought.

It was still early evening. There was no bar in the hotel so I went to the billiard room to bash balls. Three tall men I hadn't seen before were at the table. Two of them spoke English. They were students from the University of Havana, in Pyongyang on a three-year course in exchange for the hundreds of Korean students who were sent to Cuba to train as doctors. Why them? They laughed. Protocol demanded that someone be sent. They thought I would get on with the Cuban ambassador and so we left in the embassy car for tamarind juice and mojitos followed by a very good meal. The ambassador was a veteran of the revolution. Sending him to Korea had not been a friendly act: 'I'd got a bit critical of Fidel and the way things were being done in Cuba. I talked to many others about this and Fidel got angry. I would have preferred prison but they sent me here instead. It's worked.

Havana's a paradise and Fidel is god. Just get me out of here. I'll never open my mouth again.' It was the most enjoyable evening I spent in the DPRK.

The next week was spent in trains and cars. The car would often stop in the middle of nowhere. We would get out and I would be shown a site where 'GBL Comrade Kim Il-sung gave on-the-spot guidance to peasants on the wheat harvest.' At one point, in the middle of nowhere, I asked them to stop. My bladder was full. As I got out of the car I said: 'I'm just going to give on-the-spot guidance to that tree.' The interpreter and minder convulsed with laughter. It was the most reassuring sight of my trip. Nothing was said when I returned to the car, but we never stopped again.

At Panmunjom on the 38th parallel the loudspeakers were blaring out cliché-ridden propaganda. American soldiers were lounging around, occasionally pointing at the speakers and laughing. I asked the Koreans if I could use a loudhailer. When they finally agreed, I asked the Americans why they were hanging around in Asia given that their own country was on fire. They woke up a bit. I gave an account of the Kent State shootings - the Ohio National Guard had fired on and killed four students for protesting against Nixon's invasion of Cambodia - which had taken place only a few weeks before. Four million US students had gone on strike. I asked the soldiers to join me in a minute's silence in memory of the dead students, at which point a senior officer came and shepherded them all back to barracks. The Koreans were amazed. I resisted the temptation to point out that my 'on-the-spot guidance' had been more effective than GBL's propaganda.

Back in Pyongyang I was granted my appointment with the foreign minister, who gave me the official Korean position on the world. I listened politely. As I was about to leave he said: 'We appreciated your talk at Panmunjom, but there is one thing you don't seem to understand about our country. You do not appreciate the role that Comrade Kim Il-sung played in liberating and creating the DPRK.' I couldn't deny this. He gave me an odd smile.

Two years later I was asked back, to give a speech at a conference on the 'role of US imperialism in Asia'. I was reluctant but the Vietnamese persuaded me. They hadn't been invited and wanted their position on the subject defended. This time the journey took even longer. We were flown first to Prague, where the Russian military plane that was to transport us to Pyongyang was five days late. When it finally arrived it was filthy and rank; in the middle of the night it stopped to refuel at Omsk in below freezing conditions, and a few of us rushed out to breathe some fresh air. In Pyongyang, each delegate was assigned a chauffeur-driven Mercedes. I'd been hoping to be assigned the same interpreter, but my luck was out. He'd asked me for an English dictionary: I gave the one I'd brought to the new team and asked them to pass it on to him. They said he'd been transferred to a small town. At the hotel a senior party apparatchik was meeting with each delegate or delegation separately. The subject of the conference had been changed, he told me. It was GBL's 60th birthday and they thought we should discuss 'Comrade Kim Il-sung's contribution to Marxism-Leninism'. I refused point blank and demanded a flight back home. The apparatchik left the room in a nervous state.

Over dinner that night an affable Algerian professor and a representative of Frelimo from Mozambique couldn't believe what I'd done. The Algerian said he had sold himself for \$5000, the friend from Frelimo was too ashamed to name the sum he'd accepted. The next morning I was offered \$10,000, which would have come in extremely handy for the magazine I was editing. I was tempted to accept and then make a purely satirical speech, but I declined. They still wouldn't let me leave. There was no flight to Europe for a week. I said I'd fly to Pakistan. They told me that was difficult too. The Vietnamese ambassador came to see me. He pleaded with me not to leave. 'The personality cult is bad here,' he said. 'Very, very bad.'

At an official reception the day before the conference began we were all introduced to GBL. Never in

my life had I felt such an aversion to a political figure on the left. His bloated neck seemed to be inviting a bullet. I wished I'd been a Decembrist. The only words he addressed to me were distinctly odd: 'London, yes? "The Red Flag". They still sing it?'

They made the mistake of seating me on the plenum. I didn't applaud a single speech, but I did keep notes. The Politburo star who opened the conference - the subject was 'the task of social science to thoroughly defend the great leader Comrade Kim Il-sung's revolutionary thinking and propagate it extensively' - quoted a GBL speech. 'There is a revolutionary song which says: "Let cowards flinch and traitors sneer. We'll keep the Red Flag flying here." This expresses our unvarying determination.' I wondered who in Moscow had introduced him to the anthem of British social democracy. His appalling speech was interrupted 143 times for applause, standing ovations etc. My table in the hotel restaurant expanded each day as more and more desperadoes came to joke about our situation. Our codename for GBL was Peterson.

The reason for the absurdly narcissistic cult was obvious. Who the hell was Kim Il-sung? Where did he come from? Had he ever operated as a guerrilla leader? There had been other well-known Korean Communists, including a female general. Kim Il-sung killed some of them. Others had fled to China during the Japanese occupation and fought alongside Mao's partisans. Many veterans of the Long March were Koreans. It is possible that Kim Il-sung operated as a guerrilla in China and then fled to Russia. We don't know for sure. What we do know is that the Red Army freed the country in 1945 and the Chinese saved it during the Korean War. But these facts were never mentioned in DPRK propaganda. 'Juche', an aggressive form of self-reliance, was the word coined to designate this xenophobia. When I asked the interpreter on my first trip whether he had read any Marx or Engels or Lenin, he looked puzzled. 'No,' he told me. 'Everything is interpreted by Comrade Kim Il-sung.' He wasn't sure whether any of the classic texts were available in libraries.

At one stage it appeared that the United States was going to buy out the North Koreans. Clinton despatched Madeleine Albright to Pyongyang in 2000 to do a deal - loads of money for the Kims, denuclearisation of sorts followed by a soft reunification with the South - but it didn't go through. Bush had no interest at all in contact. Why? I got an answer of sorts after a public debate on the Iraq war in Berlin in 2003. My opponent was Ruth Wedgwood from Yale, an adviser to Donald Rumsfeld. Over lunch I asked her about their plans for North Korea. She was cogent. 'You haven't seen the glint in the eyes of the South Korean military,' she said. 'They're desperate to get hold of the North's nuclear arsenal. That's unacceptable.' Why? 'Because if a unified Korea becomes a nuclear power, it will be impossible to stop Japan from becoming one too and if you have China, Japan and a unified Korea as nuclear states, it shifts the relationship of forces against us.' Obama seems to agree with this way of thinking. His problem is China. The Chinese once appeared indifferent to Korea's fate. That's no longer the case. The areas near the border with China are experiencing a boom and Chinese TV programmes are heaven compared to Kimist output. How long will Beijing allow this absurd opera to continue?

Tariq Ali

P.S.

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