

North Korea continues to be a totalitarian state but the regime turns a blind eye to the development of underground private economy

Conclusion of a recent fact-finding mission of Human Rights Without Frontiers in the Korean Peninsula

HRWF (09.10.2013) - The North Korean regime continues to be a totalitarian state, the oppression of the population is ongoing and none of the fundamental individual freedoms are respected: freedom of expression, freedom of opinion, freedom of religion or belief, freedom of movement, and so on. This is the main conclusion drawn by Pierre Rigoulot, director of the Paris-based Institute of Social History and author of the book "The Aquariums of Pyongyang", who carried out a fact-finding mission in Seoul for *Human Rights Without Frontiers* from 26th September to 4th October. Moreover, the sealing off of the border between China and North Korea seems to have been strengthened in the last few months, he said.

Living conditions remain difficult and precarious, even if some observers note some stabilization and sometimes some slight progress in the macro-economic area. Though, the durability of totalitarianism must not conceal some very important realities concerning the North Korean population and the future of human rights in the DPRK.

On the one hand, it should be noted that the Party-State has alleviated its control on economic activities. This process started during the mid-1990s famine when the state was forced to allow the population (mainly women) to take the necessary initiatives to guarantee the survival of families. This economic alleviation has become more marked with the passing time, though with ups and downs.

A significant part of the population is concerned by this development. Thanks to the information and products coming from China, most North Koreans are now aware of the living standards of their neighbors. A part of this population, namely the leaders and senior managers of state companies (they are officially all state companies), now behave like real private businessmen and under cover of their official status make a lot of profit. The state just levies a tax on these activities and paradoxically benefits from this system as well.

On the other hand, the state cautiously tries to take back the control of the situation. Quite recently, it has initiated a number of timid but authentic reforms in the agricultural and industrial realm. The objective is to grant more autonomy to the companies and not to submit them any more to rigid planning.

It remains to be seen if the state will just keep it to some experiments (for the moment, one per province) or if it will attempt to extend this new economic policy.

North Korea undeniably seems to be at a turning point of its history but we do not know if the steering mechanism still works in this 70-year old vehicle.