

## UPF-IMAP Italy: North Korea - New Perspectives of Change

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"It is always a pleasure to be able to broaden the horizon and reflect not only on what is happening in Europe and Italy but also on what is happening in the East. The pandemic has shown us how much the link with the whole world is getting closer and closer, how we are more and more interconnected and closer to each other". With these words Ms. Katia Trinca Colonel, journalist of the "Corriere di Como" and Ansa News opened the discussion with Piergiorgio Pescali, journalist, a great connoisseur of South and North-East Asia, about his book "The new North Korea: how Kim Jong-un is changing the country".

More than for any other country in the world, talking about North Korea requires a preventive attitude: the willingness to open one's mind and put aside prejudices and stereotypes that have always surrounded this country. This is what the author tries to do in this book, written in North Korea, a country where he has been many times since 1996, where he witnessed the transfer of power of the Kim dynasty and experienced firsthand the changes described.

"In order to know the history of North Korea and the Kim dynasty, one must go back to the history of the Korean Peninsula, to the separation that occurred at the end of World War II, when the Soviet Union and the United States found themselves managing the Japanese decolonization of the country," the author explains. Reconstructing the historical events up to the Korean War, which ended with the armistice of July 1953, Pescali reminds us that even today, seventy years later, "between North Korea and the United States there is still an open act of war" because a peace treaty has never been reached. With the aid of a slide show, the journalist illustrated the succession of the Kim dynasty, which has led North Korea since 1948 with Kim Il-sung, since 1994 with his son Kim Jong-il and since 2011 with his grandson, the current leader Kim Jong-un.

Speaking of the current North Korean leader, the journalist calls him "perhaps the most astute and intelligent politician in the North East chessboard today. He spent several years in Switzerland, knows how the world works outside North Korea and has masterfully managed to remove the military from the levers of power." Today, the country is led by a technocratic, civilian administration. Its "Byunjin" (dual-track) policy, i.e., increasing military power along with economic reforms, eliminating windfall funding to the military, is more functional to the strategy of deterrence. It allows for greater resources for economic and productive development, more diplomatic strength and greater consensus within the

country. The new universities, including private ones, prepare not only economists, management experts, but also engineers, agronomists, and biologists. The profits of the industry are also divided among managers and in the countryside the division of a good part of the harvest among the members of cooperatives is applied. There are family-run restaurants, bed, and breakfasts, hotels, and bars. Real estate in Pyongyang has become a source of big business. "The economic vibrancy that Kim Jong-un has managed to give the country has revitalized it a bit until 2019. In 2020, Covid came along and the North Korean economy downsized."

On the violation of human rights, the author explains "that it is one of the main plagues, as generally in all Asian countries, but that things are evolving. Since the beginning of 2000, with Kim Jong-un, the penal code has been reformed. Only the offender is sent to re-education camps and not the whole family as it was the case in the past". The death penalty is still provided for. Pescali recalled how most Asian leaders contest the Universal Charter of Human Rights because it is a Western charter, where it is the individual that is important, while in Asia it is society and how Islamic countries also have a different conception of human rights.

Regarding the perception we have of North Korea, for Pescali "there is a race to the bottom as far as information on that country is concerned and for years there have been no valid reporters there. Now it is less complicated for journalists to enter North Korea, but the news, especially in Italian newspapers, are taken from the internet, even from not very credible sources and often it is just a copy and paste without verification. Many special correspondents alas prefer to describe stereotypes, because it is easier and attracts more attention from the reader. Sources are never checked, like the famous 120 dogs that allegedly mauled Kim Jong-un's uncle, which never existed."

As for political unification, "no one has ever talked about it and there won't be for at least fifty years. It does not suit either the North or the South because there is too much inequality. We talk about an economic federation in order to balance the two economies". At the conclusion of the meeting Carlo Zonato, president of the "International Federation for Peace" (UPF-Italy), organizer of the event, together with the "International Association of Media for Peace" (IMAP-Italy) a UPF project, recalled how Mr. and Mrs. Moon, founders of UPF, are originally from North Korea. He listed three of their important projects: the Highway of Peace, an international artery that starting in Japan, will cross all of Korea to connect China and Russia and then the whole world; a peace zone at the 38th parallel, with parks, museums and a new UN headquarters in the demilitarized zone. He recalled Mr. and Mrs. Moon's meeting with Kim Il-sung in North Korea in December 1991 and the "National Reunification Award", the highest honor of the North Korean government, granted to the memory of Reverend Moon on the occasion of his death."