

Republican Perspective

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“Don’t ever be the first...”

Do you ever wonder why the North Koreans clap so enthusiastically and for so long? Turns out there’s a reason.



Public displays of enthusiasm and support for the ruling family are strongly encouraged. When Kim Jong Ill died, the regime organized public mourning, featuring highly visible emotional wailing and crying. Aya Ilan, North Korea watcher, observed that “It can be assumed that many are indoctrinated and were seriously shocked and sad to hear the news.” At the same time, “expression of ‘proper’ emotions during these type of events is heavily encouraged by the regime.”

When Kim Jong Un took power, his uncle Jang Song Thaek failed to follow the proper protocol. According to NPR's Frank Langfitt, Kim was "angry his uncle disrespected him." The North Korean official news agency reported that "Jang clapped 'half heartedly' when Kim was elected..." Jang was found guilty of treason and executed.

So in North Korea there's strong incentive to show enthusiasm for the regime. And there's an interesting historical backdrop for this.

In his widely acclaimed "The Gulag Archipelago," Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn described the critical importance of enthusiastic and sustained applause.

At the conclusion of the conference, a tribute to Comrade Stalin was called for. Of course, everyone stood up (just as everyone had leaped to his feet during the conference at every mention of his name)...For three minutes, four minutes, five minutes, the stormy applause....continued. But palms were getting sore and raised arms were already aching. And the older people were panting from exhaustion....However, who would dare to be the first to stop?...NKVD [secret police] men were....watching to see who would quit first!....the applause went on---six, seven, eight minutes!....They couldn't stop now till they collapsed with heart attacks! At the rear of the hall, which was crowded, they could of course cheat a bit, clap less frequently, less vigorously, not so eagerly---but up there with the presidium [executive committee] where everyone could see them? The director of the local paper factory....stood with the presidium....Nine minutes! Ten! In anguish he watched the secretary of the District Party Committee, but the latter dared not stop....With make-believe enthusiasm on their faces, looking at each other with faint hope, the district leaders were just going to go on and on applauding till they fell where they stood...Then, after eleven minutes, the director of the paper factory assumed a businesslike expression and sat down in his seat....a miracle took place! Where had the universal, uninhibited, indescribable enthusiasm gone? To a man, everyone else stopped dead and sat down. They had been saved!....That, however, was how they discovered who the independent people were. And that was how they went about eliminating them. That same night the factory

director was arrested. They easily pasted ten years [prison sentence] on him....But after he had signed....the final document of the interrogation, his interrogator reminded him: "Don't ever be the first to stop applauding."

The next time you see images of Kim's countrymen smiling joyfully and applauding enthusiastically, notice that they clap unnaturally high---at chin level or even higher. Why? So that their rapture is visible. So that they will not be mistaken for half hearted supporters. So as to reduce their chances of meeting the same fate as Kim's late uncle Jang.

As the interrogator advised: "Don't ever be the first to stop applauding."