

Our man in Pyongyang

When I read that the Opposition's foreign affairs spokesman, Leo Brincat, had issued a statement to express publicly his concern after North Korea recently carried out a nuclear test, I couldn't help reflecting - somewhat bemusedly - on the incredible inconsistencies of the MLP's foreign policy.

As MLP International Secretary and a government backbencher way back in the early Eighties, the same Leo Brincat had publicly defended the Labour's government decision to sign a secret treaty with Kim Il Sung's North Korea and berated the then Leader of the Opposition, Eddie Fenech Adami, for publicly revealing this agreement during a PN mass meeting.

As a result of that agreement, signed when Dom Mintoff visited Pyongyang between June 30 and July 2, 1982, Malta received arms and military instructors from North Korea. The agreement itself obliged both sides not to disclose it to any third country and the reason for this was ostensibly because disclosure of its details would be against the interests of security, as the arms were needed for Malta's external defence. However the arms in question were actually suited for domestic use, i.e. for control of crowds and civil strife rather than for defence against any possible foreign aggression.

Despite the fact that Malta's GDP per capita was already much larger than North Korea's, this aid was given free "with a view to further strengthening and developing the friendship and solidarity established between the peoples and armies of the two countries in the common struggle against imperialism".

Malta's North Korean connection assumed the stuff of legends during the years of the Dom Mintoff and Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici administrations (1971-1987). The relationship started off on a high note with the Mintoff government brusquely ordering the closing down of a South Korean consular

office, simply to please the North Koreans. Not only was help sought for numerous projects that were destined to fail miserably - including the setting up of an industrial plant to manufacture medicines based on Korean ginseng - but Dom Mintoff and Kim Il Sung acted as if they were the closest of buddies.

The GWU papers and the state broadcasting station - which enjoyed a monopoly - did their best to put across the most positive image imaginable of North Korea, with reporters coming back from Pyongyang waxing lyrical on the beauty of the city. Supplements on the construction industry - in Malta - were replete with vivid descriptions of the architectural and civil engineering feats that one can see in North Korea.

In 1984 The Pyongyang Times carried a poem in Maltese in praise of "the greatest Hero and Patriot Kim Il Sung", a 'literary' joint venture signed by none other than Prime Minister Dom Mintoff and President Agatha Barbara. I quote a translation of the opening paragraph of this 'poem' to give an idea of the level of awe and lackey-ism in which Kim Il Sung was then held by the state of Malta:

"To you who triumphed over the ruling Japanese and freed your country from the imperialist powers united against the Korean people."

Oh dear!

But the greatest service that Mintoff gave to Kim Il Sung was in the process of grooming his son and successor Kim Jong Il, the current "Dear Leader" of North Korea. Kim Jong Il spent over a year in Malta learning English and Western music. Mr Mintoff 'hosted' Kim Jong Il in a country house built in a green area in the outskirts of Bahrija where the anointed future leader spent one of his formative years, becoming acquainted with European ways while being constantly guarded by a retinue of Korean-trained Maltese security officers paid from public coffers. The story made it to the British press with a

report in The Guardian claiming that Kim Jong Il had imbibed "the Mintoff touch - flamboyant, mischievous, making great waves out of little water"!

Kim Jong Il has now gone a long way, becoming one of the few leaders of a nuclear weapon armed state, but with his experience of our country, I think we have every right to refer to him as 'our man in Pyongyang'.

Some might perhaps consider recounting all this today as a futile exercise aimed at trying to use the bad old Mintoff days to score points in favour of the PN in the looming election battle. I believe that come the next election campaign, the PN should rest on its laurels, rather than on the negative aspects of the MLP's past history. But this does not mean that we should obliterate history or that the past and present political stances of current leading politicians should not be subject to scrutiny.

After all, the MLP's North Korean connection is not as far away in the past as much as some might today try to imply. In 1993, when Alfred Sant had already assumed the MLP leadership and was busy trying to give his party the 'New Labour' mantle, Joe Debono Grech touting himself as "vice-president of the International Committee for the Peace and Reunification in Korea", wrote in the local press (The Malta Independent, April 25, 1993) accusing the US and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) of "misplaying the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to jeopardise the sovereignty and security of the DPRK (North Korea), a non-nuclear weapon state, and to pressure them to give up their will to live in peace and security".

At the time North Korea was still party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, although it had given notice of its intention to pull out of it.

Debono Grech had been a member of the Cabinet under both Mintoff and Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici; in the latter case, the Cabinet that decided to award Gieh ir-Repubblika to Kim Il Sung.

Come 1996 and 'New Labour' swept into power, with the result that the vice-president of the International Committee for the Peace and Reunification in Korea who had written such hogwash in aid of Kim Il Sung was again given a prominent Cabinet post.

Today Mr Debono Grech's colleague in Dr Sant's short-lived Cabinet, Leo Brincat, pontificates that North Korea's first nuclear test was a provocation that is of concern to those who want stability in the region.

Has this Leo(pard) changed its spots?

micfal@maltanet.net