

## Political Succession in North Korea

For the past year, there has been intense interest and speculation regarding the rise of Kim Jong-un, youngest son of North Korea's current leader Kim Jong-il, as successor to his father. A handover of power to the younger Kim would constitute a successive third generation of rule by the same political family. Therefore, the issue of succession raises important questions about the nature of the North Korean political system, the future of the country, and the impact that any leadership change will have on North Korea's relations with South Korea and the rest of the world. While the specific course of North Korea's political succession is still developing, the issue itself is crucial to understanding the internal dynamics and the external ramifications of leadership change in the country.

### Why is North Korea preparing for political succession?

The most immediate reason why North Korea has been moving towards consolidating Kim Jong-un's succession is the health problems of Kim Jong-il. When Kim Jong-il failed to make a public appearance during the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of North Korea in September 2008, there was speculation that he was seriously ill. Subsequent reports from South Korean and international media outlets indicated that he may have suffered a stroke, prompting the need for medical attention from foreign doctors. North Korean media remained silent on the issue. It was not until April 2009 that Kim Jong-il made a public appearance again when he was present during his re-election as Chairman of the National Defense Commission. Although his appearance dispelled rumors that Kim Jong-il was dead or near death, his health issues prompted the regime to expedite succession plans.

### How did Kim Jong-un become successor?

Two months later in June 2009, South Korean newspapers reported that Kim Jong-un, Kim Jong-il's youngest of three sons was chosen as successor to lead the country after his father. Kim Jong-il's two older sons were passed over for the position for various reasons. Kim Jong-nam, the eldest and half-brother to Kim Jong-un, had supposedly fallen in disfavor after an embarrassing incident in 2001 when he tried to enter Japan (to visit Disneyland) on a fake passport. The second son, Kim Jong-chul, apparently was

not considered the best choice due to concerns about his health and character. Thus, the youngest son was considered the favorite to succeed his father, and some speculate that his ascendance began in 2006 after he graduated from college.

Another indication that the youngest son had been chosen were reports that Kim Jong-un had been given the title of "Brilliant Comrade" and had political songs written in his honor. These are common methods for the regime to cultivate a cult of personality similar to those of his grandfather and father. The former, Kim Il-sung, founded the nation and was called the "Great Leader," and the latter, Kim Jong-il, is known as "Dear Leader." Finally, Kim Jong-un's official portrait is reportedly being distributed throughout the country to hang aside those of his grandfather and father. North Koreans are required to hang portraits of their leader in their homes.

In September 2010, the younger Kim was formally introduced to the world during a meeting of the Workers' Party of Korea in Pyongyang, the capital of North Korea. Kim Jong-un was groomed as successor to his father when he was appointed to several key positions in the government. First, he was named a four-star general in the North Korean army (despite having no formal military experience). Second, he was named a deputy chairman in the National Defense Commission, which is the highest governing authority in North Korea. Third, he is also now a member of the Workers' Party Central Committee, which is responsible for ideological policy.

Finally, on February 10, 2011, Kim Jong-un was officially anointed successor to his father when he was appointed as Vice Chairman of the National Defense Commission, which would put him in the number two position in the North Korean power hierarchy after his father. While his formal ascension within the power structure has been relatively quick, it is still unclear exactly how much power and authority he currently exercises within the regime. Kim Jong-un has since made several public appearances alongside his father, with rumors that he even accompanied Kim Jong-il on foreign diplomatic trips.

### Who is Kim Jong-un?

Definitive information on Kim Jong-un has been difficult to verify. One reason is the lack of access to concrete

information from inside North Korea. Another reason is that the North Korean regime tightly controls the flow of information and often uses information for political purposes. For example, Kim Jong-un is reported to have been born in 1983 or 1984. Some suspect that the regime may want to inflate his age to portray experience since he is relatively young or to coordinate with significant political anniversaries in the country.

What is clearer is that his mother is Ko Young-hee, a former performer in a North Korean art troupe who became a consort of Kim Jong-il. She is also the mother of Kim Jong-chul, second son of Kim Jong-il and elder brother to Kim Jong-un. Ko died of illness in Europe in 2004, but her political status in North Korea now has risen in concert with the ascension of her youngest son to power.

Various news reports have indicated that he attended school at the International School of Berne in Switzerland, and if true, the international exposure and its impact on the young Kim would be interesting to see as he assumes more power in North Korea, a country that has been relatively closed off to foreign contact. He later attended college at Kim Il-sung University in North Korea, a school that is named after his grandfather and where his father attended as well.

When the young Kim was publicly introduced in September 2011, many observers noted his physical resemblance to his grandfather, Kim Il-sung, which helps him build his authority in North Korea during the transition to power. Kenji Fujimoto, a Japanese citizen who served as Kim Jong-il's cook in North Korea, has related his experiences with Kim Jong-un. He recounts that Kim Jong-il favored his youngest son because of his strong character.

### **What does Kim Jong-un's rise tell us about the North Korean political system?**

Kim Jong-un's succession to power in North Korea reflects many of the important characteristics of the North Korean political system. First, while there may be superficial similarities between North Korea and other socialist and communist countries of the past and present, such as China and the former Soviet Union, the hereditary transition of power from one familial generation to another is relatively unique.

In many respects, such transfer of power is more reminiscent of dynasties in ancient Korea, which highlights the traditional and nationalistic characteristics of the North Korean regime that revolve around a central leader and his personal authority. In Korean dynasties, other family

members or relatives that could challenge the throne were sent off to the countryside. Likewise, the eldest son and half brother, Kim Jong-nam, primarily now resides outside North Korea in Hong Kong or Macau. Similarly, when the current leader Kim Jong-il rose to power, his half brother, Kim Pyong-il, served abroad as ambassador for a lengthy period of time. Thus, the rise of Kim Jong-un parallels in many respects the rise of his father, Kim Jong-il, who was also groomed for a period of time to succeed Kim Il-sung. One notable difference is the pace of transition, which has been quicker for Kim Jong-un due to the ill health of his father.

In addition, the familial context of Kim Jong-un's rise to power is evident in the parallel rise of his uncle, Jang Song-taek. Many observers see Jang (husband to Kim Jong-il's sister) as serving as a regent to the young Kim in order to prepare him for succession as well as deter any internal challenges to his power after Kim Jong-il.

That Kim Jong-il has relied on his closest family members to consolidate power around his son should not be a surprise, but it does indicate that any transfer of power can be a sensitive and controversial move even in North Korea where most outside observers believe has a strict hierarchy of power with no opposition. But the careful grooming of Kim Jong-un illustrates that there are various factions within the regime, and Kim Jong-il has been methodical in trying to weaken or eliminate any potential opposition to his son's authority.

Finally, and on a related note, Kim Jong-un's rise emphasizes the central role of the military in North Korean politics. In accordance with the *seon-gun* (or "military-first") policy, Kim Jong-il has placed his son in pivotal leadership positions in the military and the National Defense Commission, as noted above. As the outside world shows concern over North Korean nuclear weapons and the security situation on the Korean peninsula, the transfer of power through military channels indicate that these issues will continue to predominate under Kim Jong-un.

### **What does this mean for inter-Korean relations?**

The tense relationship between the two Koreas spans more than six decades, and the issue of reconciliation and reunification is a perennial one in Korean politics. With the transfer of power to Kim Jong-un there are many questions about how he would affect inter-Korean relations and North Korean policy to its southern neighbor.

An ominous indication may have been the March 2010 sinking of the South Korean ship, *Cheonan*, and the November 2011 shelling of Yeonpyeong Island near the

border of the two countries. There are rumors that the younger Kim was involved in planning both incidents to show his strength and consolidate his power within the military. Scholars point to the parallel situation with his father in 1983 when North Korea tried to assassinate South Korean President Chun Doo-hwan in Yangon (formerly, Rangoon), Burma. The bombing which killed members of Chun's cabinet, but not the president was allegedly orchestrated by Kim Jong-il as he was consolidating his power under Kim Il-sung.

If such speculation were true, then there may not be fundamental change in the tense relations between the two Koreas. However, it is probably too early to tell exactly how internal North Korea politics will affect inter-Korean relations. Furthermore, inter-Korean relations will also be dependent on South Korean politics, as well as regional and international factors.

Will the younger Kim be different from his father? In many respects, this is the most important question regarding Kim Jong-un. With North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons, many observers are keen to detect any signs of how policy might change in North Korea under Kim Jong-un. Right now, it is too early to tell. On the one hand, a new generation of political leadership can often usher in new ideas and perspectives, especially if those North Korean leaders are exposed to the world more. For example, there were news reports in October 2011 that another young member of the Kim family was attending school in Europe. Pictures reportedly of Kim Han-sol, son of Kim Jong-nam and grandson of Kim Jong-il (thus, a representative of the fourth generation), posted online showed a youth very much like those in South Korea and other countries. He was active on social media websites and displayed great knowledge and critical analysis of world affairs.

On the other hand, even exposure to the outside world doesn't mean that a younger generation of North Korean leadership will necessarily undertake drastic reforms and change in the country. Kim Jong-un's selection may have been possible precisely because he is most likely to continue the current policies of his father. While any push for economic reform in North Korea may stem from what North Korea may learn from other economies in the world, it may take on a distinct North Korean characteristic given the nationalist and Kim family-centric political structure.

The key variable will be the longevity of Kim Jong-il's rule. The longer that he can stay in power despite his health problems, the longer preparation time his son has to gain experience and consolidate his power within the regime. In addition, father and son are more likely to coordinate policies for a smoother and more consistent transfer of power. But if Kim Jong-il is suddenly gone,

then the young Kim and his relative lack of experience may pose both challenges and opportunities for North Korea. Overall, it will be very interesting to see how a new generation of leadership in North Korea will affect the country, inter-Korean relations, and world affairs.

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