



North Korea's dynastic succession

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On 17 December 2011, North Korea's 'Dear Leader', Kim Jong-Il, died. His death had long been posited as a moment of great potential danger and uncertainty, both for North Korea and the wider region. However, the succession of his youngest son, Kim Jong-Un has proceeded remarkably smoothly up to now. Following Kim Jong-Il's funeral on 28 December, Kim Jong-Un has been declared the "supreme leader of the party, state and army". The message to a nervous outside world so far has been unity, stability and continuity. However, the transition will be prolonged and there could yet be political turbulence. Kim Jong-Un may be tempted to engage in a provocative act towards South Korea or the rest of the world in order to show his mettle. A third nuclear weapon test would be the most dramatic act of provocation. Perhaps the greatest threat to the regime's survival comes from the country's protracted and deep economic crisis. North Korea has experienced acute food shortages over the last year and international aid has not filled the gap.

For further background, see:

[North Korea: An Update](#) (SN05915, 24 March 2011)

[North Korea: Recent Developments](#) (SN05096, June 2009)

[North Korea: The Nuclear Issue and Prospects for Change](#) (RP 07/03, January 2007)

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1 The final months of Kim Jong-Il

The last nine months of Kim Jong-Il's rule was a relatively quiet period for North Korea both at home and abroad.

At home, the precariousness of everyday life for most ordinary North Koreans was underscored by growing reports of food shortages as the public food distribution buckled under the strain after a severe winter, with some aid agencies predicting a catastrophic famine and saying that up to six million people (out of 24 million) were at risk. The European Commission gave food aid but the US and South Korea, as they have done in recent years, held back.¹ In November 2011 the UN urged that food aid should not be politicized.² Chinese aid also continued to be provided, but it was nowhere near enough to make a significant difference to the humanitarian outlook.³ The situation was compounded by floods in part of the country in July, in response to which the US sent some assistance. North Korean efforts to evade sanctions and obtain scarce foreign currency through illicit activities – which in the past have included drug trafficking and counterfeiting money – were shown to be continuing when a scam swindling South Korea's online gaming industry was tracked back to Pyongyang.⁴ There were also reports of an intensified political crackdown as part of preparations for the hand-over of power to Kim Jong-Un, with a spike in numbers being held in the country's labour camps, according to new satellite images. Around 200,000 were believed to be being held in these camps.⁵

In terms of the outside world, relations remained difficult but did not deteriorate further. There were tentative signs that a new phase of negotiation might begin soon on the nuclear issue and broader security matters. However, in the end, this did not happen before the death of Kim Jong-Il in December 2011.

Following the Fukushima nuclear accident in March 2011 in Japan, international concern about the safety of North Korea's nuclear programme intensified. US Special Envoy on North Korea, Stephen Bosworth, met the North Korean deputy foreign minister, the first bilateral meeting in over two years, at the end of the July. While only "exploratory" in nature, it did suggest that the US administration had decided to be more active in its engagement with North Korea again.⁶ Analysts argued that Kim Jong-Il was preoccupied above all in the immediate term with getting a resumption of much-needed humanitarian aid. But the US was unwilling to move further without South Korean agreement, whose president, Lee Myung

¹ "The European Commission will give food aid to North Korea", 4 July 2011. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/commission_2010-2014/georgieva/whats_new/headlines/archives/2011/07/20110704_en.htm

² "North Korea's children in need of food aid, agencies warn", *New York Times*, 25 November 2011

³ "China boosts border security as fear of famine in North Korea grows", *Daily Telegraph*, 31 March 2011; "Tell the world we are starving", *Sunday Telegraph*, 17 July 2011

⁴ "North Korea uses virtual weapons and wizardry to magic up real world cash", *Financial Times*, 6 August 2011

⁵ "Kim Jon Il gulags spread in a grim preparation for son's succession", *Times*, 4 May 2011

⁶ "Neighbours are nervous as US resumes talks with North Korea", *Guardian*, 29 July 2011

Bak, remained adamant that North Korea should apologise first for the 2010 Cheonan incident (as described in SN05915). At a summit with Russian President Medvedev, Kim Jong-Il proposed a North Korean moratorium on the production and testing of nuclear weapons if the Six-Party Talks resumed.⁷

By the summer, there was some speculation – ultimately unfounded – that the Six-Party Talks could resume in the autumn. But there were also continuing signs that the North Korean regime’s fundamental goal remained to ensure its survival. The London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies claimed in July that North Korea and Iran were collaborating in the building of a long-range missile that would be able to carry a nuclear warhead and on uranium enrichment for weapons purposes.⁸ Even as he suggested resuming negotiations, Kim Jong-Il was declaring that 2012 would be the year in which North Korea became a full nuclear weapon state, which many took to indicate that there might be another nuclear weapon test. Then, during late November 2011, North Korea’s rhetoric took on a confrontational tone once again as South Korea undertook military exercises near Yeonpyeong, the island attacked by the North in November 2010.⁹

2 Death of Kim Jong-Il and succession of Kim Jong-Un

Kim Jong-Il died from a heart attack on 17 December 2011, although his death was not announced until two days later. The death of Kim Jong-Il had long been posited as a moment of great potential danger and uncertainty, both for North Korea and the wider region. The relative brevity of the preparation time there had been for the (estimated) 28 year-old Kim Jong-Un to take the helm led some to fear the worst. However, others predicted that, in the short-term, the dictates of survival would impel the ruling elite to unite around Kim Jong-Un and that internecine struggles would take time to emerge. Kim Jong-Un is the youngest of the three sons of Kim Jong-Il known to the world; the other two (Kim Jong-Nam and Kim Jong-Chol) were discarded by him for a range of reasons and do not appear to pose a threat to Kim Jong-Un. Potentially the biggest threat to his power, his uncle, Jang Song-Thaek, has so far been by Kim Jong-Un’s side, apparently acting as ‘Regent’.

In the two weeks or so since Kim Jong-Il died, the succession does indeed seem to have progressed remarkably smoothly. Kim Jong-Un was quickly being called the ‘Great Successor’ and ‘A great person born of heaven’. He was then named Supreme Commander of the armed forces and head of the Workers’ Party Central Committee. At the memorial service that followed his father’s funeral, Kim Jong-Un was described as the “supreme leader of the party, state and army.”¹⁰ Kim Jong-Un’s accession to power was given final sanctification at his father’s state funeral on 28 December.

A set of reinforcing myths about him have also been speedily mobilised. The striking physical resemblance to his grandfather, Kim Il-Sung, reportedly enhanced by plastic surgery, has also been invoked to secure his domestic position, with some regime apologists even talking in terms of reincarnation. The speed of dynastic succession has led some to wonder whether designations of North Korea as ‘Communist’ are really valid any more – and that it is better understood as a ‘neo-feudal’ dynastic dictatorship.¹¹

⁷ “North Korea seeks new talks on nuclear arms”, *Daily Telegraph*, 25 August 2011

⁸ “N. Korea and Iran ‘collaborate on nuclear missile’”, *Daily Telegraph*, 22 July 2011

⁹ “North threatens to turn Seoul into ‘sea of fire’”, *Guardian*, 25 November 2011

¹⁰ “North Korea hails Kim Jong-Un as leader”, *BBC News Online*, 29 December 2011

¹¹ “Kim Jong-Il funeral”, *Daily Telegraph*, 28 December 2011

Every effort has been made to create an impression of unity, stability and continuity by the North Korean regime. But Kim Jong-Un's authority will inevitably be considerably less than that of his father towards the end of his rule. He will need to retain the loyalty of the military and the bureaucracy and will not be able simply to dictate terms. There may well be fighting between factions. In this sense, the transition of power will be an extended one and its outcome is not pre-ordained simply because things look superficially calm now. However, there has been a persistent tendency for outside observers to underestimate the durability of the regime and the Kim's; many predicted that Kim Jong-Il would not last long when he formally took the reins of power in 1994.

However, it does seem highly unlikely that the regime can continue indefinitely. A moment of existential crisis must come at some point. Perhaps the greatest threat to the regime's survival comes not from outside its borders but from the country's protracted and deep economic crisis. Yet Kim Jong-Un will be constrained in what he can do to address the crisis by his need to keep the military fed and watered (the long-standing 'Military First' policy) and by fears that too much opening up could undermine the regime's political power. However, there are reports that the state's ability to provide food and control economic activity has been weakening again – leading, for example, to a resurgence of unofficial markets.

There is no indication whatsoever that Kim Jong-Un will seek to open society up at home, whether politically or more broadly in terms of human rights. On 31 December 2011, the state media announced that the family of any defectors will henceforth be punished for three generations.¹² Many speculate that Kim Jong-Un may be tempted to engage in a provocative act towards South Korea or the outside world more widely in order to demonstrate his mettle (some claim that the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong incidents last year were his doing). This has left North Korea's many foes very much on their guard, with South Korea announcing submarine exercises for this month. In recent days, North Korea has repeated previous statements that it will never deal with South Korean President Lee Myung Bak.¹³

China, which appears to have encouraged North Korean succession planning, strongly backed Kim Jong-Un, will undoubtedly be doing what it can to avoid any confrontations – but, as we have seen before, its influence is a long way short of total. Recent expert assessments say that North Korea may be no more than one further nuclear weapon test away (following on from those carried out in 2006 and 2009) from being able to produce a miniaturize a warhead that can be deployed on a missile.¹⁴

In truth, there is always a lot of guess-work involved when it comes to North Korea, by far the most opaque country on the planet. Richard Lloyd Parry, writing recently in the *Times*, has said;

Any honest piece of reflection on this country should begin with this sentence mounted above it like a neon slogan over the statue of the Great Leader: 'I don't know what is going on in North Korea and nor does anyone else.'¹⁵

International reaction to developments in North Korea has been relatively circumspect. Speaking in the immediate aftermath of the announcement of Kim Jong-Il's death, William Hague said:

¹² "Kim curses defectors' families for three generations", *Sunday Times*, 1 January 2012

¹³ Lee Myung Bak is expected to seek re-election later this year, but is currently struggling in the polls.

¹⁴ "North Korea seeks to give message of stability", *Financial Times*, 30 December 2011

¹⁵ "Snowy funeral doesn't herald a Korean spring", *Times*, 29 December 2011

The people of North Korea are in official mourning after the death of Kim Jong-il. We understand this is a difficult time for them. This could be a turning point for North Korea [...] We hope that their new leadership will recognise that engagement with the international community offers the best prospect of improving the lives of ordinary North Korean people. We encourage North Korea to work for peace and security in the region and take the steps necessary to allow the resumption of the Six Party Talks on denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula.¹⁶

Remarkably little is known about Kim Jong-Un himself, which partly reflects how recently he has entered the political scene as the designated successor to his father.¹⁷

3 Additional background material

N. Eberstadt, "[What is wrong with the North Korean economy?](#)", American Enterprise Institute, 1 July 2011

M. Green, "[Pyongyang's options after Kim Jong-Il](#)", *Foreign Affairs*, 19 December 2011

A. Lankov, "[North Korea's choice: collapse or reform](#)", *Foreign Affairs*, 19 December 2011

B. Babson, "After Kim Jong Il: Will There Be Change or Continuity In North Korean Economic Policy?", [38 North](#), 20 December 2011

T. Michell, "[Kim's death and the North Korean economy](#)", BBC News Online, 20 December 2011

K. Gause, "[Meet Kim Jong-Un's new team](#)", *Foreign Affairs*, 21 December 2011

R. Cavazos, "[Nothing succeeds like succession](#): chinese language perspectives on Kim Jong-Un's transition to power", Nautilus Institute report, 23 December 2011

Here are links to information relating to *human rights and humanitarian issues* in North Korea:

Amnesty International [reports and alerts](#). Its most recent statement claims that Kim Jong-Il's death "[could be an opportunity for human rights](#)".

Human Rights Watch [reports and statements](#), including a link to its 2011 World Report entry

Webpage of the US-based [Committee for Human Rights in North Korea](#)

N. Eberstadt, "[Should North Korea be provided with humanitarian aid?](#)", American Enterprise Institute, 22 September 2011

World Food Programme [page on North Korea](#) See in particular a [November 2011](#) crop and food security assessment mission report.

¹⁶ For a range of other official responses at the time of the announcement, see BBC News Online, 19 December 2011 at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-16239940>

¹⁷ A *BBC News Online* profile (31 December 2011) can be found at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-11388628>