



North Korea: domestic developments during Kim Jong-Un's first year in power

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This note briefly surveys domestic developments in North Korea since the death of Kim Jong-Il in December 2011 and the succession of his son, Kim Jong-Un. The nuclear issue is referred to only in passing. The note comes with the usual health warning about North Korea – as one expert, Andrei Lankov, [said recently](#): “Frankly, most of the time we are entirely ignorant, and a very large part of what is reported in the media is based on unreliable hearsay.” He went on to say that nowhere is this truer than in the sphere of ‘high politics’, including leadership-level manoeuvring.

See also Standard Note SN06536, [“In brief: North Korea and the nuclear issue one year on since the succession”](#) (28 January 2013)

For previous House of Commons Library briefings on North Korea see: [North Korea's dynastic succession](#), (SN06173, 3 January 2012); [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 Recap: Kim Jong-Il's record

Before coming to the domestic record of Kim Jong-Un in his first year, it is worth briefly recalling what happened under his father between the death of Kim Il-Sung in 1994 and his own death in 2011. Kim Jong-Un took about three years to consolidate his political position, during which the country plunged into a major economic crisis, which extended to a horrific famine. The cornerstone of his rule was the 'Military First' (*Songun*) policy, in which the military was privileged over other sections of economy and society in the name of protecting the country from existential external threats. North Korea saw no meaningful reform in the sphere of human rights. During the 2000s, there were occasional moments when the party-state appeared to be countenancing limited economic reforms, under which market forces and the price-mechanism would operate more autonomously, but these moves were usually reversed. This was also the case with an ill-fated 2009 currency reform. For all but the elite, life for North Koreans was characterised by economic hardship and political repression. Kim Jong-Il faced the classic dilemma of all dictators that contemplate reform – a calibrated reduction in control can lead to unintended consequences that trigger their demise. Ultimately, the North Korean leadership under Kim Jong-Il never felt confident enough to try the Chinese or Vietnamese 'developmental path'.

2 Kim Jong-Un's first year

2.1 Rapid consolidation of power

Despite his youth, Kim Jong-Un appears to have consolidated his political position much more quickly than his father did. The taking on of all leadership roles across the party, state and army was over in a matter of months. However, this does not mean that the political transition as a whole is complete. Nor is it yet clear how far Kim Jong-Un enjoys untrammelled power or how far he depends on the support of other members of the elite, including his uncle, Jang Song Thaek, and could at some point face a leadership challenge. But few now subscribe to the view that he is merely a figurehead. Further light on his status may be shed if or when Kim Jong-Un tries to replace the nominal heads of the state and government, who still remain from his father's time in power.

2.2 A reformer?

Some 'North Korea' watchers have begun to express optimism that Kim Jong-Un could turn out to be much more reform-minded than his father. Alexandre Mansourov is one of those who has been in the relatively upbeat camp and, following the anniversary of Kim Jong-Il's death, published a series of articles – whatever, their strengths and weaknesses, they are by far the most in-depth analyses currently available – on Kim Jong-Un's first year.

Mansourov points to Kim Jong-Un's more relaxed and upbeat public style, the acknowledgement of the existence of his wife, Ri Sol Ju, and other symbolic details as illustrating that he is committed to a different tone of leadership. However, he also identifies other, more substantive moves. Kim Jong-Un has rehabilitated a range of senior government officials sidelined by Kim Jong-Il. His first year has seen repeated "purges and shake-ups" in the army, including an instruction that it should give up some of the economic assets it built up under his father to civilian control. The party-state seems to be recovering the ascendancy over the army that it had under Kim Il-Sung, to whom Kim Jong-Un has consciously sought to link himself (more, perhaps, than he has to his father). Their physical likeness has also not gone unnoticed. Whether this amounts to a full-blown abandonment of the 'Military First' policy remains to be seen; claims that it does should perhaps be viewed with caution, given that North Korea remains a 'garrison state', with the fourth largest

standing army in the world. Whatever the wider motivations, North Korea's moving ahead with another ballistic missile test in December 2012 and the February 2013 third nuclear weapon test might also be seen in part as a way of compensating and preoccupying the reshuffled military leadership.¹

Kim Jong-Un has also shown a greater interest in promoting foreign trade and investment and developing special economic zones. Given the parlous state of North Korea's relations with South Korea and Western countries, China has become ever more overwhelmingly the North's dominant economic partner in recent years. In 2011, China is estimated to have accounted for more than 70 per cent of North Korea's total volume of trade.

All in all, Kim Jong-Un seems genuinely committed to what is being called a 'People First' policy, while delegating day-to-day responsibility for the new direction to Premier Choe Yong Rim and the Cabinet. Mansourov adds that there was increased expenditure on health, education and national infrastructure such as roads during 2012. Crucially, he says that there was also a "better-than-expected grain harvest" in 2012, which – while it does not resolve the country's chronic food security problems - will have had a positive impact on the livelihoods of ordinary citizens. But he notes:

[...] on the critical issue of economic reform, while change may have been in the air, in my judgement, the current regime does not yet have any clear understanding of how to restructure the agricultural sector and revive the backbone of the North's industrial economy – large scale state owned enterprises. Nor does it have a viable approach to rebuild the nation's finances, pay down its debts, and get back to planning for the future. Also despite Kim's emphasis on the Cabinet's centrality in economic management at the expense of the both the party and the military, little progress has been made in the way the government directs the country's economy. Despite early expectations that the new regime would enunciate a comprehensive 'New Economic Policy', outside observers were left disappointed by the lack of serious action on the ground. But too much was also made of the regime's reported promise of some sort of agricultural reform (the so-called June 28 policy measures) and rumours of new pricing and wage regulations for small and medium enterprises, as well as impending monetary reform; all to no avail.²

The June 28 New Economic Management Measures have been reported as comprising:

- Sub-work teams on state farms to be reduced to 4-6 persons
- The state can keep 70% of the production quota, with the farm keeping the rest
- The farm can also keep any production above the quota
- All produce retained by the farm can be sold on the market at free-market prices
- Private investment in production is allowed if under the auspices of state or co-operative enterprises.

Randall Ireson argued in November 2012 that "this so-called reform is not particularly new", echoing initiatives in 2002 and 2004 that produced little in practice. He went on outline the

¹ A. Mansourov, "Kim Jong Un's domestic policy record in his first year: surprisingly good", 38north.org, 15 January 2013

² Ibid

sorts of policy changes that really would signify a meaningful move towards “marketization”, none of which are currently being proposed.³

China’s strong influence does not yet seem to have brought about a decisive shift by Kim Jong-Un towards its ‘model’. Indeed, even modest policy moves towards a ‘Beijing model’ could yet turn out to be tactical, rather than strategic – particularly if China does take a more confrontational stance on North Korea’s nuclear weapons programme over the coming months. The new North Korean leadership appears absolutely committed to retaining a nuclear weapon capability, perhaps seeing it in the medium to long-term as a more cost-effective form of insurance against ‘regime-change’ than a massive standing army and potentially freeing more resources up for domestic economic development.

2.3 Dismal continuity on human rights

The ‘Beijing model’ places less pressure on Pyongyang to expand currently non-existent civil liberties than it does to promote economic reform. Some relaxation on restrictions on foreigners using their mobile phones has been promised and, following the controversial recent visit to the country of Google’s Eric Schmidt, there have been hints that some increased access to the Internet may be under consideration. On human rights, Kim Jong-Un is reported to have ordered the closure of one of the most notorious camps for political prisoners – the one in Hoeryong, North Hamyong Province.⁴ But the fundamentals remain unchanged. The UN Human Rights Commissioner, Navi Pillay, said in January 2013:

There were some initial hopes that the advent of a new leader might bring about some positive change in the human rights situation in DPRK [...] But a year after Kim Jong Un became the country’s new supreme leader, we see almost no sign of improvement.

According to a UN press release:

Last month, Ms. Pillay met with two survivors of the country’s political prison camps, which are believed to contain more than 200,000 people. The two survivors described the harsh conditions prisoners live in, which include torture, rape, slave labour and other forms of collective punishment. They also lack food supplies, medical care and adequate clothing.

“Their personal stories were extremely harrowing,” Ms. Pillay said. “They described a system that represents the very antithesis of international human rights norms.”

The High Commissioner cited the case of one person she met who was born in a camp and spent the first 23 years of his life there, where he was not only tortured and subjected to forced labour but, at the age of 14, was also made to watch the execution of his mother and his brother.

Ms. Pillay emphasized the importance of obtaining access to the country to be able to provide human rights protection to the most vulnerable populations, since what little is known about the camps comes from those who managed to escape.

“The highly developed system of international human rights protection that has had at least some positive impact in almost every country in the world seems to have completely bypassed DPRK, where self-imposed isolation has allowed the

³ R. Ireson, “[Agricultural reform again – or not?](#)”, 38north.org, 15 November 2012

⁴ A. Mansourov, “[Kim Jong Un’s domestic policy record in his first year: surprisingly good](#)”, 38north.org, 15 January 2013. Still a propos Google, Google Earth is helping human rights groups to map North Korea’s system of prison and labour camps much more extensively than has been possible in the past.

Government to mistreat its citizens to a degree that should be unthinkable in the 21st century.”

Ms. Pillay called on the international community to take a “much firmer step” towards finding the truth about the elaborate network of prison camps, and apply pressure on DPRK to bring about change for its 20 million citizens.

Ms Pillay called for the UN to commission an international inquiry into the human rights situation, past and present, in North Korea and urged the international community not to lose sight of human rights issues in its preoccupation over the country’s nuclear weapons programme.⁵

2.4 What does the future hold?

Mansourov concludes as follows:

While some observers are quick to assert Kim Jong Un is not a reformer, I believe it is too soon to say one way or the other [...] I judge that North Korea under Kim Jong-Un’s leadership is poised to recover in the next five to ten years. Not only will the North Korean government be able to ‘feed, clothe and house’ its own people to their satisfaction, but also Pyongyang will continue to build up its missile and nuclear capabilities, thereby nurturing its domestic legitimacy and growing its international strength.⁶

However, in mid February, in the wake of North Korea’s third nuclear weapon test, he was sounding more pessimistic:

We may see two steps backward this coming year because of the growing isolation around North Korea," Mr. Mansourov said.

"Specifically, that initial push to roll back the 'military first' policy and start allocating resources from the munitions industry to the civilian economy is now in question. I am afraid the escalating tensions will force [Mr. Kim] to rethink the domestic development strategy, and to instead yield to the pressures from the hardliners in the military."⁷

A major falling-out between North Korea and China over the nuclear issue would throw everything up in the air. This cannot be ruled out, but – despite continuing ‘provocations’ – the odds, given how much China fears instability or collapse in its next-door neighbour, must still be against it.

Note on sources: As stated earlier, Mansourov has published more on Kim Jong-Un’s first year than anybody else to date. We have drawn extensively upon his January 2013 piece, “[Kim Jong Un’s domestic policy record in his first year: surprisingly good](#)”. However, it is worth noting that in December 2012 he published a longer three-part survey. The first part is called “[A dynamically stable regime](#)”. For the second part, click this [link](#); for the third part, click this [link](#).

⁵ “[Top UN official calls for international inquiry into human rights abuses in DPR Korea](#)”, UN press release, 14 January 2013

⁶ A. Mansourov, “[Kim Jong Un’s domestic policy record in his first year: surprisingly good](#)”, 38north.org, 15 January 2013

⁷ “[Contradictory paths: Will North Korea’s Kim Jong-un pursue economic modernization or a nuclear weapons program?](#)”, *National Post* (Canada), 16 February 2013