

Death of Kim Jong-il: the rise of the Party

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Kim Jong-il is no more. The state news agency KCNA reported that he died on his train on Saturday 17 December 2011. This is the official version (now doubted internationally) that observers of North Korea have actually seen under preparation for quite a while, including in works of art that were discussed here.

The public was informed rather quickly, less than two days later. Kim might in fact have died much earlier. In a system where the death of a living dictator is a taboo topic, it is questionable that all necessary arrangements had been made in advance. It takes time to agree on a detailed funeral list with 250 names in strict hierarchical order, an obituary praising the right aspects of his rule, and a precise schedule of instructions for the immediate period after the ruler's demise. Most importantly, a far-reaching decision had to be made on how to proceed — and how to announce the successor.

The matter was complicated by the fact that Kim Jong-il himself had failed to finish the succession process. This was most likely to happen next year, when the country would celebrate the 100th birthday of its founder Kim Il-sung in April 2012. The status of Kim Jong-un would have been elevated at the yet unannounced 7th Party Congress. It is fair to assume that Kim Jong-il's death at this point in time came as a surprise for the North Korean leadership, too.

In this situation, the Worker's Party took over. In a highly symbolic move, it acted like the Church in medieval Europe: it crowned the Emperor. The obituary, published in the Party newspaper and signed by the Central Committee, devotes its latter part to the introduction of Kim Jong-un as the next leader — as the 'great successor' (widaehan kyesungja). This is the first time he has been explicitly named as such. Note also that the complete sentence says he is the great successor to the revolutionary cause of chuch'e — not son'gun (Military First Policy). This is an emphasis on ideology, the realm of the Party.

The resuscitation of the Party's leading role in society has been visible for a few years. Among the last hints was a group picture taken on 13 December 2011 during one of Kim Jong-il's last field guidance trips. It shows a banner reading: 'Let's defend the Central Committee with Great Leader Kim Jong-il at its top with our lives!'

This is a remarkable deviation from earlier versions, according to which soldiers were supposed to defend only Kim Jong-il. Now it's the Central Committee — a collective, symbolising the Party. The order of institutions signing the official obituary published by the Central News Agency supports this analysis. It lists the Central Committee of the KWP first, followed by the Central Military Commission of the KWP, the National Defence Commission, the Standing Committee of the Supreme People's Assembly (the parliament), and the Cabinet of the DPRK. How more obvious can the real power structure be?

The big question now is will the North Korean elite and population accept the Central Committee's decision, and will they welcome Kim Jong-un as the new leader? History teaches us that things do not always proceed according to plan or conventional wisdom. We cannot exclude the possibility of ambitious individuals testing the opportunities. With Kim Jong-il's death, North Korea lost the Secretary General of the Worker's Party and the Chairman of the Central Military Commission, but

there still are an official Head of State; a Standing Committee of the Politburo, of which Kim Jong-un is not a member; and a National Defence Commission, also without Kim Jong-un. There are powerful individuals like Choe Yong Rim, Prime Minister; Kim Young Nam, Head of State; Jang Song Thaek, Kim Jong-il's brother-in-law and alternate member of the Politburo, and his wife and Kim Jong-il's sister Kim Kyong Hui who is a regular Politburo member and a General. Ri Yong Ho is a Vice Marshal. Will they back up Kim Jong-un, or try to manipulate and sideline him?

What comes next? As quickly as possible, every space on propaganda posters, in the media, and in people's minds will be filled with Kim Jong-un until there is no other choice but to proceed with him, lest the dangerous impression of potential for change will be risked. According to Gregory Henderson, Korean politics is all about competition for control of the centre — not about competition against the centre. In other words, the key question regarding domestic politics in North Korea now is not whether Kim Jong-un will be the next leader, but what type of leader he will be.

It would also be fair to expect a wave of purges against actual or potential opponents. This happened in the past, too. In the coming months, continuity and consolidation will be the name of the game. We will see Kim Jong-il being placed next to his father — in propaganda, and probably even physically in the Kumsusan memorial palace. Kim Jong-un will emphasise how he will govern in the spirit of these two immortal leaders. To show his filial piety, he will award a posthumous title to his father and show proper mourning by not accepting any title for himself for three years. This mourning period will give the elite time to figure out how to deal with the young Kim without triggering impatience among the population. If everything remains quiet, the 7th Party Congress would be held after three years and further cement the rule of Kim Jong-un by making him the Secretary General.

In an ideal case, this will mean that Kim Jong-un becomes a leader of the Chinese type. Reform and opening Chinese style — a one Party dictatorship together with a market economy — could be the consequence. However, the risk in Kim Jong-un's case is his young age. He will not die naturally anytime soon, and he is unlikely to give up his post easily after a few years. As he gets used to power and more experienced in the power game, his ambitions will grow. The old generation will make room for handpicked younger officials who depend entirely on Kim Jong-un. The Party is strong now; it might get weaker in the future. The classical power struggle between worldly and spiritual leaders in medieval Europe fills many volumes of books. So the Party in North Korea now has the crucial task to ensure that enough checks and balances are provided to prevent the young ruler from becoming another Kim Il-sung. This is what we will have to look at when we observe North Korea in the next months.

Many open questions remain. But one thing is obvious: North Korea, a nuclear state, now stands at a major juncture in its development.

P.S.

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