

North Korea's Succession Plan: Stability and Future Outlook

Kim Jin-Ha

Research Fellow, Center for Unification Policy Studies

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The Party Delegates' Conference held on September 28th formally made the Kim Jong Eun succession system official. North Korea displayed the status of its dynastic successor to the entire world as Kim Jong Eun appeared on the dais alongside Kim Jong Il to observe a massive military parade on October 10th, the anniversary of the founding of the Korean Workers' Party. In an unusual move, the authorities even invited Western journalists to observe the festivities. It appeared that the ascension scenario had been fine-tuned beforehand and was cruising along smoothly according to plan.

As if in response, in the Joint Communiqué issued following the 42nd annual US-ROK Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) of October 8th, the defense ministers of South Korea and the US made reference to “unstable conditions” on the peninsula, an allusion to sudden changes in North Korea's situation. In a reflection of these concerns, both countries agreed to work to create new strategic plans. This is premised upon the belief that North Korea's 3rd generation succession presents a systemic threat.

From the perspective of South Korea, which aims to promote unification through peaceful means, the time has come for a diagnosis of the stability of the succession system. After all, this period of systemic instability could be a truly critical phase in North Korea's history. This paper analyses the shockwaves that the succession process may produce on North Korea's

internal political dynamics and attempts to identify some of the factors that may influence the stability of the succession system.

I . Characteristics of the Succession System

An examination of the officially unveiled succession system reveals the following characteristics. First, a power transition has been set in motion through the “3rd generation succession” of Kim Jong Eun. The regime has gone public with its plans for the succession, based on blood ties, of another supreme leader to follow in the footsteps of Kim Jong Il. This is the moment when the tradition of privatization of the state is being firmly entrenched. Through Kim Jong Eun’s promotion to the rank of 4-star general of the KPA, he has gained a foothold to take solid control over the military, while his sudden meteoric rise to the position of vice chair of the KWP Central Military Committee reveals an intention to exercise control over the military via the Party.

Second, relatives and well-connected elites have been set up as the advance guard of the new system through positions in the main KWP organizations (the Central Military Committee, the Politburo, the Secretariat, etc.), revealing the outlines of a shadow succession government. The emerging core group of supporters includes Kim Kyung Hee (4-star general, Politburo member, director of the KWP Light Industry Bureau), Jang Sung Taek (candidate Politburo member, Central Military Committee member, NDC vice chairman), Choi Ryong Hae (central party secretary, Central Military Committee member), Kim Pyong Hae (candidate Politburo member, central party secretary), Mun Kyeong Duk (chief party secretary for Pyongyang City), Kim Kyeong Ok (1st vice director of the KWP Organization and Guidance Department), and Kang Sok Ju (vice premier, politburo member). The North Korean state’s true Neo-patrimonial nature was on display.

The fact that Jang Sung Taek remained a candidate member of the Politburo might be taken as a sign that his rise in stature has tapered off somewhat. But it would be more reasonable to interpret this as a cunning strategy to preemptively avert the danger of power becoming too concentrated in one individual. In terms of political experience and latent influence, as well as reliability - which is the most important quality in a supporter - Kim Jong Il will be hard-pressed to find a support group that can surpass the power couple Jang Sung Taek and Kim Kyung Hee, with their direct blood connection to the father-son leadership. We should also note the rise of

other members of the front-line group, such as Choi Ryong Hae, Ri Young Ho, and Woo Dong Cheuk, who will work to assist these two.

Third, there has been a partial generation shift in the military. It is likely that the rise of members of the so-called “new military leadership,” including Ri Young Ho (chief of KPA General Staff, member of the Politburo Standing Committee, military rank of *chasu* -one rank above 4-star general), Kim Jung Gak (1st Vice Director of the General Political Bureau, 4-star general), Choi Bu Il (recently promoted 4-star general, vice chief of KPA General Staff), Kim Myung Guk (chief of the General Staff Operations Bureau, member of the KWP Central Military Committee), Jung Myung Do (Navy admiral), Hyun Young Chul (8th Army commander), Kim Young Chul (director of KPA Reconnaissance Bureau), and the newly promoted Ryu Kyung, Ro Heung Se, and Ri Du Jung, and the relative decline of the old military group dominated by Oh Kuk Ryol and Kim Il Chol, originated from a desire to give close family members like Jang Song Taek a firmer grip on the military. This move has a strong character of a preventative measure, using a generational transition to preempt possible resistance by members of the old military guard or related military elements in response to the organizational shift to the Kim Jong Eun succession system. The rise of individuals like Choi Bu Il, who, thanks to the reorganization, have rapidly acquired vassal-like status, hints at the possibility of a shortcut to the ranks of the high elite.

Individuals connected to the military-industrial ruling coalition, such as Kim Jong Il, Kim Jong Eun, Ri Young Ho (chief of the General Staff, member of the Politburo Standing Committee), Woo Dong Cheuk (candidate member of the Politburo, Central Military Committee member, 1st vice chair of the NDC), Kim Chang Sop (head of the State Security Political Department), Ju Sang Sung (Politburo member, NDC member, director of People’s Security), Ju Kyu Chang (director of the Department of Machine-Building Industry), and Chae Hui Jung (director of the KWP Document Management Office), have secured their positions in the central leadership through their assertive control over the military and security organizations. This bodes ill for the prospects of successful negotiations on the nuclear issue.

Fourth, there are signs of efforts to maintain a balance of power among various organizations and individuals. There has been an increase in individuals holding dual positions, but this indicates not so much a concentration of power as a strengthening of the system of mutual surveillance and supervision among the power players. This appears to be an attempt to prevent any individual power structures from forming. The promotion of military figures into the Party structure and the dual assignment of family members and vassals to high positions in

the military are probably calculated to promote mutual control between military and Party organizations¹⁾. Further, the reinforcement and organizational reform of the Party structures will strengthen the Party's capacity to rule through its weapons of ideological control and surveillance, and reveals the intention of the successor and the leading coalition to monitor and control the government and military through the Party.

What is conspicuous here is the effort being made, through a system of checks, balances, and the unique tactic of divided power, to prevent any weakening of central power which may be brought on by Kim Jong Il's infirmity and Kim Jong Eun's inadequacy. This shows that Kim Jong Il's desire to hold power is as absolute as ever, and as long as he is alive he will not allow a new center of power to form around his successor. Thus it appears unlikely that Kim Jong Eun will be given a degree of real power comparable to that which Kim Jong Il was able to wield under the Kim Il Sung-Kim Jong Il joint leadership system. However, this balance-of-power, status-quo formula, which refuses to delegate real power to anyone, will have only limited effectiveness in containing the tension and instability if Kim Jong Il passes away in the near future. In such an event, Kim Jong Eun and his supporters, represented by the Kim Kyung Hee-Jang Sung Taek line, will likely find it difficult to gain control over other influential individuals, particularly military leaders.

II . Political Impact

So, what is the political significance of the Kim Jong Eun succession system?

First, the transition which has taken place during Kim Jong Il's rule from the revolutionary, charismatic power structure to a more old-fashioned family- and individual-based structure has been completed, and the basis for legitimacy has changed. The North Korean neo-patrimonial state has been now firmly established. Let us examine how this change has been formalized through the announcement of Kim Jong Eun's succession.

If violence and socio-economic benefits are the physical foundation for maintaining the relationship between the rulers and the ruled, then the issue of commanding automatic

1) Despite the growing trend of dual assignments, there are still the same 6 NDC members concurrently serving on the Party Central Military Commission, even though the NDC increased its numbers from 10 to 12 members. This can be seen as a sign of the desire to prevent over-concentration of power through mutual competition and balance between the two groups.

obedience to the system of distribution of power and status - i.e. constructing a leadership system of convincing legitimacy - can be considered as the superstructure which determines the cost of maintaining the system and the effectiveness of government rule. If the basis for legitimacy is decisively weakened, then management costs will soar and it will become increasingly difficult to maintain the system.

After the departure of the first generation of charismatic leadership through a phase of revolutionary transition, the task of stabilizing the system around a more secure everyday ruling structure is extremely difficult, and inevitably the issue of selecting the 2nd generation leader becomes a crucial factor in determining system stability. In a system of authoritarian one-man rule the problem of passing on supreme power is even more delicate. Under a personal leadership system issues of regime legitimacy, focused on the method of power transition, inevitably become a topic of public debate.

Under the *suryong* system, in which sole ruler Kim Il Sung held total power, North Korea's solution to the issue of power transfer was an atavistic father-son succession which based regime legitimacy on succession along a charismatic blood-line²⁾. This was a reactionary choice which repudiated the modern alternative of systematizing the selection of a successor through restoration of the party-state system.

They made doubly sure of the stability of the father-son succession by creating a joint leadership structure under Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. This joint father-son system, which backed up the power handover for over 20 years, faithfully performed the role of minimizing frictions and opposition in the process of standardizing North Korea's revolutionary dictatorship into an Asian-style autocratic government³⁾. Under the joint government, the basis for legitimacy was a charismatic-ideological mobilization structure based on a quasi-religious belief in the sacred mission of carrying out the revolutionary task, and the physical foundation was a dual combined government structure based on traditional family-individual leadership, as represented by the power succession.

2) Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, Edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 234.

3) 'Oriental despotism' is a term for an autocratic leadership system characterized by excessive state intervention and subordination of society, a bloated management bureaucracy, autocratic rule, marginalization of the people through exploitation and forced mobilization, a hereditary leadership class, and theocratic political ideals. Karl A. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (New York: Vintage, 1981).

The collapse of the socialist bloc and the severe shrinkage of the North Korean economy put the regime in danger of collapse, but the Kim Jong Il government was able to use strong survival tactics to preserve the elite group loyal to the Kim family, even while demanding sacrifices from the entire population, thanks to the supporting foundation of charismatic authority it had inherited. The aura of the charismatic legacy left by Kim Il Sung rescued his son in that time of crisis. With the 3rd generation succession to Kim Jong Eun, the regime has lost the leeway to convincingly claim charismatic legitimacy in the eyes of both the subjugated classes and the elite. This means that they have adjusted their basis for legitimacy to a more obvious traditional-patrimonial system.

The unprivileged masses, who have experienced the tragedy of a failed state system at its darkest hour, have no choice but to acknowledge that the Kim Jong Il regime has failed to qualify as a charismatic leadership, and they must find it tragicomic that the government is now boasting of his young son's charisma based on his blood line. If Kim Jong Il departs soon, without the aid of a sacred authority, the North Korean state will degenerate into a decadent regime forced to resort to shoddy nationalistic mass agitation and overt power plays to deal with subversive acts originating from either the top or the bottom of society⁴⁾.

The familial-individual leadership structure uses a system of distributing political power and economic benefits in exchange for the loyalty and obedience of the management classes and the subjugated classes. Because of this, the general transition from a combined leadership system tinged with charismatic authority to a familial-individual leadership system will inevitably cause the expense of regime maintenance to increase rapidly. This is due to the fact that they will not be able to rely on automatic obedience and sacrifice based on ideological devotion and faith. As they have repudiated the notion of seeking a fundamental solution to the task of increasing domestic production through comprehensive reforms of the political and economic system, in the immediate future it will be effectively impossible for the regime to afford the enormous costs of supporting a 3rd generation succession, and as a result they will fall into an existential dilemma.

Second, they have attempted to raise the functionality and status of the Party in “symbolic terms.” This reveals the intent to normalize the 3rd generation succession structure through the Party organization (“The Workers’ Party is the Party of Kim Il Sung”) and to keep the bloated

4) As it approaches its final phase, the Kim Jong Il regime is already frankly showing a tendency toward this sort of decline.

military leadership and aging high-level officials in check. The Party works to prevent divisions from forming among the power elite by increasing consensus through systematic distribution of power, and promoting a new group of elites to co-opt a portion of the potential opposition. This partial, symbolic restoration of the functions of the Party elite can be seen as a way of preparing a tool for stabilization during the post-Kim Jong Il transition period⁵⁾. Further, it appears they are trying to restore the official façade of legitimacy of the unofficial, individual-familial leadership structure by making a gesture of returning to formally-legally impersonalized governance based on the bureaucratic institutions of the Party.

However, because they are trying to maintain the basic framework of ultimate power succession and family-based rule, any political reforms will be limited. In this respect, any predictions of complete restoration of the Party-state system or a return to a normal socialist state system are of dubious credibility. The partial rise in the Party's status is not so much a restoration of the Party-state system as it is a symbolic, stopgap measure to compensate for the limits of one-man rule and support the implementation of the succession structure. Further, as it was impossible from the outset to expect Kim Jong Eun to hold the same degree of status and power as his father, this can also be seen as a move to temporarily revive the role of "the Party as the advance guard" of the supreme leader in order to take some of the load off of Kim Jong Eun. However, it can also be interpreted as a move by the core group of supporters, led by Jang Sung Taek, Ri Young Ho, and Kim Kyung Hee, to spread their influence through the Party organization.

Third, the declaration of Kim Jong Eun's succession can be seen as an official declaration of the permanency of the *ancien regime*. From the Kim Jong Il regime's perspective, in terms of transferring power, there is only one practical option which allows them to: 1) minimize fissures among the current ruling elite; 2) maintain their ruling privileges; and 3) decrease the level of political and social shock and instability that may result from the power transfer. That option is father-son succession. Ultimately these developments can be seen as a declaration by the regime to the world and the ordinary North Korean people that it will continue to fight to the death for its own survival, through the grossly enlarged military-industrial complex which has become a permanent ruling structure, the *songun* system which backs this structure up through acts of violence, the ruling paradigm of the state security mechanism, and the

5) For detailed information on the correlation between the durability of authoritarian systems and the systematization of the general functions of the ruling party, refer to: Jason Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 16-43.

adventurous foreign policy which uses the nuclear gambit and threats against neighboring countries for the sake of prolonging the regime.

III. Threats to the Stability of the Succession System

Can the North Korean succession system proceed smoothly as planned? There are numerous elements which could potentially derail the process.

First, there is the possibility of power struggles breaking out over the redistribution of power and privileges. As the distribution of privileges is crucial to maintaining fidelity in a family-based system of individual rule, the regime will have to disburse various special favors and rights to the new elites and ruling organizations. However, with the limited resources available for distribution, this process is likely to provoke fierce conflicts among rival organizations and factions.

Particularly if they attempt to partially introduce systemic control functions through the restoration of the party-state system, they will have to conduct both individual purges and redistributions of limited national resources (e.g. redistributing resources from the military economy to the Party or the public economy), but doing so is highly likely to lead to rifts between the Party and the military. It will be effectively impossible for the conglomerate-style central leadership to keep control over the younger group of active military officers who command the field armies, and this may even lead to conflicts between generations or between ranks.

By similar logic, revived conflicts may erupt among the Party, military, and government, as well as intra-organizational rivalries. Particularly in a familial/individual leadership structure which is based on informal support relationships, these sorts of conflicts can lead to factionalization within groups which share common interests, and dramatic changes in power dynamics and opportunistic conflicts between factions brought on by the realignment of power and interests are likely to contribute to an overall disruption of regime stability. Of course, this volatility is no absolute indication of the emergence of reformist forces at the top or revolutionary changes from the bottom⁶⁾. However, the decline in regime stability and growing confusion will make that possibility that much greater.

6) The Chosun Dynasty continued for centuries despite deep-rooted factional strife and periodic disorder.

Second, it will be unreasonable to expect the Kim Jong Eun government to achieve the level of stability seen under the Kim Il Sung-Kim Jong Il joint government. Kim Jong Il began the process of becoming successor in 1974 when he was elected a member of the Politburo and the head of the KWP Organization and Guidance Department, and in 1980 he formally took the role of successor with his appointment to the Standing Committee of the Politburo the KWP Central Military Committee. Considering that, we can postulate that it takes at least 5 years to properly establish someone in the role of successor. If Kim Jong Il's death comes in the near future (within 5 years), the aforementioned power struggle will likely be much more cutthroat and chaotic.

If Kim Jong Il dies before Kim Jong Eun is fully positioned as the sole dictator, the scramble for rights and privileges may expand downward from the top into a limitless competition in the absence of control or oversight. Of course, with the core support group of close relatives in place and mutually keeping each other in check, that possibility is low, but with the position of absolute power in play we cannot exclude the possibility of a power struggle even at the highest level. In the worst-case scenario, it is even possible that a series of sudden coups by the elite guards or the military will reduce the country to leaderless chaos. On the other hand, if Kim Jong Il continues to govern for a sufficient period of time and the next-generation leadership group has a chance to form with the successor at its center, i.e. if an unacknowledged duplicate power structure forms, there is still the possibility of smoldering enmity remaining between the older and younger leadership groups.

Finally, there is the possibility of resistance from the people. As the state continues to fail, the reality is that public loyalty to the system is growing weaker. Through its *songun* and public security policies, the Kim Jong Il government has selectively invested its resources and what depleted funds remain after the financial collapse into the organizations which operate the state's violent means of control and the privileged groups which have taken them over. This has the character of a preemptive strike to protect against national chaos and systemic damage which may be brought on by latent resistance from the unarmed/controlled/oppressed masses. From the perspective of the masses, who have been forced to fight for their very survival due to the selective forced redistribution of resources, it must seem that the North Korean system is a kleptocracy with a predatory economy.

As a result of over a half-century of totalitarian rule, any spontaneous civil/social groups, student groups, free labor unions, or religious groups that could function as focal points for mobilizing resistance have become effectively extinct thus the likelihood of mass resistance

forming in an autonomous and organized way is extremely low. However, the collapse of the public distribution system and the emergence of a self-sufficient means of survival through spontaneously created markets have accelerated the tendency toward social secularization and economic rationalization, and the likelihood of automatic obedience to the idealized totalitarian mobilization system also appears to have declined. Clearly, passive resistance and quiet acts of disobedience are on the rise. Therefore the cost effectiveness of government control will inevitably suffer an overall decline. The collapse of the distribution system has led to the mass emergence of marketization forces which may have little political impact but are of great social significance. In toiling ceaselessly for their own survival and also laying a foundation for a new economic movement from the bottom up, these pro-market forces are acting as pioneers in inspiring the masses with outside information and the aforementioned new activities and ways of thinking. If the elite class begins to fracture, these pro-market forces might mobilize into a latent resistance movement.

Under current conditions the direct coordination and political mobilization of the subjugated classes seems a remote fantasy, but with the addition of fractures among the elite class, this latent explosive force may become a reality. If destabilizing factors increase while the government's hold on power grows weaker and disorganized but broad-based mass resistance begins breaking out continuously, then as various societal and professional organizations that were created and regulated by the state to perform totalitarian mobilization and surveillance functions become excluded from the top leadership group and form their own resistance elite, these groups may become the organizational-ideological focal point for mobilizing an opposition force. Or the exact opposite may happen: after Kim Jong Il's death, if fractures among the elite and mass disobedience become threats, the top leadership may attempt to break through the crisis by instigating a *juche* fundamentalist mass struggle in the style of a "cultural revolution" in order to take back ruling authority. Amid the ideological tempest the central leadership may attempt to extend their grip on power through mass mobilization of radical shock troops and large-scale purges of intellectuals and bureaucrats who display passively disobedient tendencies. In this way, internal instability may heighten dramatically.

In conclusion, assuming Kim Jong Il survives long enough to pour sufficient efforts into securing the succession system, during his lifetime it will be impossible to predict what dramatic shifts in system stability might be brought about by policy changes or unforeseen events. However, when we consider how the accumulated systemic contradictions - the spontaneous expansion of market forces for the sake of survival, the exploitive bureaucracy which feeds off of them, and the elements of the depleted, nonfunctioning state-owned economy which are surviving

through deformed, predatory practices - might combine with a patrimonial ruling system which is characterized by frequent political realignments and power struggles based on pursuit of power and wealth, in the mid- to long-term there is no way of guaranteeing the continued stability of the regime. While it is difficult to predict a sudden collapse, it appears clear that we are witnessing the advent of an era of uncertainty. We have arrived at a point where it is essential to develop a firm determination toward unification and the strategic flexibility to deal with fluid circumstances in North Korea.