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Motivation behind Kim Jong Nam's Assassination and Hidden Side of Kim Jong Un's Reign of Terror

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Shocking news of assassination of Kim Jong Nam, Kim Jong Un's half-brother, took place on February 13th in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, has been emerging as a global issue. When considering the identity of the assailants, who were either arrested or managed to escape, how they killed him and what the motivation was behind the killing, chances are that North Korea committed an act seemingly organized and orchestrated by the state. The assassination has its significance in the following two aspects. First is the motivation behind the killing. There has been a mounting speculation as to why at this improbable time, the life of so-called "Mount Baekdu bloodline" had to be lost in the midst of the associated high risks - the one who was already ousted from the center of power and therefore was not at all a threat to the regime. Another question that remains unanswered is that what are the advantages or effects to be gained from this attack, which leads to the motive behind the murder at the expense of high risks associated with the killing.

First, the motive behind the assassination can be analyzed from the perspective of the psychology of the ruler. Given the family background

of Kim Jong Un, it seems natural that he lacks competence in his lineage and succession unlike his father Kim Jong Il, who was born as a son of the official wife. Kim Jong Un could have carried a feeling of inferiority from not being a pure Mount Baekdu bloodline since his mother was born in Osaka and Kim Il Sung did not know his existence when he was alive. So the chances are that the very existence of Kim Jong Nam itself could have been a stumbling block that obstructed Kim Jong Un's domination among Mount Baekdu bloodline. Especially, his close aides, tasked with designing Kim Jong Un's idolization, might have wanted to either implicitly or explicitly give him the impression that Kim Jong Nam was a threat to the regime, out of the frantic desire to show off their loyalty. The assassination of Kim Jong Nam could be interpreted as having been committed in an attempt to relieve such anxiety.

Second, the crime could have been committed in a bid to ease the uncertainty prevailing in internal and external situations and block the unnerving feelings from the bureaucratic elites. Young Kim might have carried feelings of insecurity as the regime's ruler more than anyone imagined due to the growing number of North Korean diplomats and high-ranking officials feeling the country in recent years. The killing could serve as a warning sign to North Korean defectors and the power elites. Through the attack, Kim Jong Un might have wanted to make it known to the ruling elites that traitors must be brought to justice and be rightly punished, or he could have sent a strong message demanding the elites to pledge unwavering allegiance to him.

Third, the murder might have been used as a means of tackling the mounting domestic issues in governing the regime. Since Kim Jong Un came to power, the elite class could have felt an elevated level of agitation by the continuous cycle of supervision, control, purge, and execution of the power elites in the party, government, and the military. In particular, Kim Jong Un might have felt pressured that he is responsible for the public animosity building up toward the ruling and powerful elites, who have

actually exercised Kim Jong Un's reign of terror. For example, the recent dismissal of Kim Won Hong, former director of the State Security Department(SSD) and the execution of other ministers could be seen as a counter-attack of the Organization and Guidance Department(OGD) against SSD, who has wielded absolute power with unwavering trust of Kim Jong Un on their back in the midst of his reign of terror and thus recklessly intruded into the domain of other authorities.

SSD has emerged as the highest authority ever since Kim Jong Un took power. Since then, it has continued to expand their domain by taking up some of the responsibility that used to belong to OGD, exercising the investigation rights for general crimes, and running the organization in charge of spying on the highest-elite class. Especially, Kim Won Hong had been at the forefront of practicing Kim Jong Un's reign of terror, such as establishing a department within SSD tasked with exercising special orders from Kim Jong Un and carrying out a secret operation of eliminating figures that considered to be a thorn to the regime both at home and abroad. OGD, humiliated by the SSD's dominance, might have been waiting for an opportunity to rise up again. A series of events that had occurred from December 2016 to January 2017 - dismissal of Kim Won Hong, execution of ministers, and full-scale investigation on SSD - could, therefore, be seen as OGD winning a victory in its counterattack against SSD and degrading SSD's standing and going back to their past glory of dominance.

What should be noted is that Kim Jong Nam was assassinated right after OGD had SSD under its full control. It is also possible that SSD had committed the killing under the orchestrated planning of OGD and Kim Jong Un's order because whether and when the attack is launched can never be decided without the final approval of either OGD or Kim Jong Un. OGD and Propaganda and Agitation Department, both of which have been tasked with idolization of Kim Jong Un, are highly likely to have significantly affected the planning and decision of the killing.

In short, the murder of Kim Jong Nam could be interpreted as a result of combination of Kim Jong Un's anxiety over his ruling and the mechanism of rein of terror. Kim has faced constant international scrutiny, mostly consisting of skepticism, doubt, and mistrust over his ability to rule the regime, ever since he came to power. He has showed off the confidence and ability for control as the supreme leader through nuclear and missile provocations, the reign of terror for the power elites, and construction of city as a means for display. The lack of experience as a leader of the country and the isolation from the international community could have been morphed into hostile feelings - sometimes paranoiac and vigilant toward people close to him. The longer he goes unacknowledged by the international community, the longer his desire for being recognized as a leader remains unmet, the more likely he could become irrational or show radical behavior in governing the regime. Unsettling feelings as a leader could become widespread across the bureaucratic sphere in the form of "reign of terror." And under such circumstance, the elites are likely to seek a way for their survival by showing off how loyal they are to the regime, rather than faithfully following through the guidelines or orders from the top. ©KINU 2017

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