

Kim Jong Il's Birthday and the Kim Jong Eun Regime

Chun Hyun Joon

(Director, Information Center for Unification Studies)

Online Series CO 12-05

Last February 16th would have been the 70th birthday of Kim Jong Il, if the dictator had not passed away on December 17th. As the first occurrence of Kim's birthday after his death, there was some curiosity as to how North Korea would celebrate this day now that "the sun has vanished." Generalizing based on the announcements made thus far, it appears that the absolute idolization of Kim Jong Il is being consolidated. This idolization campaign has proceeded at a rapid pace, with propaganda about Kim's eternal presence, construction of "eternal life" monuments, awarding of Kim Jong Il medals, establishment of the Kwangmyeongseong Festival, and issuance of memorial coins. The pace of this idolization process exceeds that which occurred after the death of Kim Il Sung in July of 1994.

Because Kim Il Sung had achieved absolute idolization even before death and Kim Jong Il faced no obstacles to power, the posthumous idolization of Kim Il Sung could proceed at a fairly leisurely pace. However the present circumstances are somewhat different. Kim Jong Eun has had only a brief training period as successor, has little experience in state affairs, and seems to lack an adequate grasp of the general disposition of the high elites. To overcome these weaknesses, Kim Jong Eun and his

supporting group are rapidly proceeding with the absolute idolization of Kim Jong Il and its political uses.

Through this absolute idolization process, they are working to ensure that Kim Jong Il's greatness becomes an established, unquestioned fact, to support the political logic that Kim Jong Eun was legitimately named as successor by "the great Kim Jong Il." This is similar to the "Kim Il Sung = Kim Jong Il" logic that was put forth during the idolization process that followed Kim Il Sung's death in 1994. In fact, considering North Korea's political culture, even without this kind of artificial idolization effort there is no apparent problem with Kim Jong Eun's authority. This is due to the low cultural standard of the people and the absence of any alternative power, as well as the strong political and social control mechanisms. However the core ruling class seems somewhat insecure. Therefore after ostentatiously celebrating Kim Jong Il's birthday on February 16th, they will likely continue to pursue various policies on several fronts to establish Kim Jong Eun's ex-post facto legitimacy.

First, the "great work" of the *juche* revolution started by Kim Il Sung will continue as before. The North already began emphasizing Kim Jong Il's parting injunctions and the continuation of the *juche* revolution during the funeral period. Thus the *juche* ideology with its philosophy of *suryeong* absolutism and the "military-first" ideology will continue. Not long after Kim Il Sung's death, on November 1st 1994, Kim Jong Il published a treatise entitled "Socialism is Science" which firmly established the *juche* policy line. It seems possible that Kim Jong Eun may also soon publish his own philosophical treatise reflecting the opinions of his core supporters as to the safest "path dependent" ideology.

Second, the absolute idolization and charismatic characterization of Kim Jong Eun will continue until his authority is stabilized. The military-first political order is also destined to continue for a time. In 1994 Kim Jong Il appeared at the "100-Day Commemoration Ceremony" on October 16th, one hundred days after the July 20th memorial service for Kim Il Sung; this time, just four days after Kim Jong Il's December 18th funeral ceremony, Kim Jong Eun appeared with the "Seoul Ryu Kyong Su 105 Guards Tank Division" for an on-site inspection on January 1st, 2012. This is evidence of a policy focused on the military. In return, the core military elites led by Ri Young Ho have formed a "collective support structure" escorting and protecting Kim Jong Eun to ensure that no one, not even Jang Sung Taek, can harbor "ambitions." Special solicitude is being bestowed on various loyal members, for instance on February 9th when 132 high-level officials including Ri

Young Ho were awarded Kim Jong Il medals, but on the other hand merciless punishment will be delivered to any who stand in opposition. Their strategy on one side will involve “benevolent politics” based on the promotion of Kim Jong Eun as “the embodiment of Kim Il Sung,” while another aspect will involve crackdowns on defections and stricter social controls.

Third, there will probably be increased opening to the outside. On January 16th Yang Hyeong Seob, a relative by marriage of Kim Il Sung and a vice chairman of the Supreme People’s Committee Standing Committee with the highest *songbun* class rank possible, remarked “We are studying examples of economic reform in other countries.” This is becoming a reality. Despite still being in the mourning period for his father, Kim Jong Eun has proclaimed a number of laws related to opening, such as the Foreign Investors’ Business Registration Law, and on February 23rd he agreed to a 3rd round of US–DPRK talks. Based on past precedents, this appears likely to produce some useful results for both North Korea and the US. On August 10th 1994, just one month after Kim Il Sung’s death, the US and North Korea held high–level talks, and on October 21st the two countries signed the Geneva Agreement.

Fourth, North Korea’s policy toward the South will remain hard–line for a time. North Korea, which has decided not to deal with the South Korean government due to its refusal to allow free condolence visits after Kim Jong Il’s death, appears to be waiting for the next South Korean administration to take office. This is because the opposition parties are all advocating flexibility in North Korea policy.

Since 1984, “the kingdom on frozen ground” has been a favorite phrase used to describe North Korea. Of course, recently this frozen ground has begun to thaw a bit, but the kingdom remains the same. However, the thaw in the frozen ground at its foundation signifies that public sentiment is changing, and that the kingdom built on top of it will also melt. Our honest advice to the new–born Kim Jong Eun regime is that, if “opening” is too uncomfortable, then rapid “internationalization” may be useful to stabilize the regime. Neighboring countries should be made aware that the melting of frozen ground is a “hot” process, not a “cold” one.