

The Stability and Durability of the Kim Jong-il Regime

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More than two years have passed since the death of Kim Il Sung in July 1994, but his son and anointed successor Kim Jong-il has not yet emerged officially as the head of state. The posts of general secretary of the Korean Workers Party (KWP) and president of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea have remained vacant, encouraging North Korea watchers around the world to make various predictions regarding the time and method of his official succession to power. The junior Kim also made the time of mourning one year longer than expected by those watchers who thought he would take over at least of one of the two vacant posts at the beginning of the third year.

Pyongyang's ruling hierarchy has now escalated propaganda campaigns calling upon the people to uphold him as incarnation of the late Kim Il Sung and to safeguard "our-style socialism," abiding by the instructions the late Kim left behind. In the meantime, Pyongyang's foreign policy has concentrated on promoting relations with the Western world, taking advantage of international concerns over the nuclear issue and recent flood damages. They have succeeded in inducing Washington to full-scale talks for the improvement of relations, and in getting Tokyo and other countries to offer aid for its flood victims—they

even received 150,000 tons of free rice from their archenemy, South Korea.

The situation in the North is complicated enough to produce widely varying speculations: the junior Kim might have been virtually removed from power; the military is in power;¹ he shares power with Politburo members in a new collective leadership; he is exercising monolithic power. None of these can be cited as the most reliable, but one observation in common is that he himself is eminently safe at the moment.

There are two views on how long the Kim Jong-il regime will last after its official inauguration: early collapse and long duration. The current director of the CIA stated at a hearing of the Senate Information Committee this year—the first such statement by an official of the US administration—that collapse of North Korea is quite within the bounds of possibility.²

This writer will try to answer: Is Kim Jong-il's leadership position stable? Is he exercising monolithic power? Will his leadership last very long?

Framework of Analysis on Changes in the North Korean Political System

Main Factors and Classifications

S. M. Lipset argues that the stability of a regime "depends not only on economic development but also upon the effectiveness and the legitimacy of its political system."³

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- 1 William Colby, former American CIA director, guessed that the military has been ruling the country by exploiting the junior Kim merely to protect the legitimacy of the regime. *Joong-ang Ilbo*, 16 October 1995.
 - 2 *New York Times*, 18 February 1996. In addition, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that the North Korean situation is similar to that of early stage of collapse of the Eastern European socialist countries. *Los Angeles Times*, 11, 16 February 1996.
 - 3 Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man* (New York: Doubleday, 1963), p. 64

He defined actual performance as effectiveness, the extent to which the system satisfies the basic functions of government as most of the population and such powerful groups within it as big business or the armed forces see them. He thought that legitimacy involves the capacity of the system to engender and maintain the belief that the existing political institutions are the most appropriate ones for the society. According to him, a system with high effectiveness and legitimacy is stable, with low effectiveness, unstable; crisis in effectiveness and legitimacy brings about crisis in system change.⁴ Based on Lipset's theory⁵ and the unique situation of North Korea, this writer would like to look at legitimacy, efficiency, coerciveness and solidarity.

- The legitimacy of a regime can be judged by whether it was established through legal procedures and whether the people approve. The legitimacy of Kim Jong-il's regime could be judged by the durability of ideological factors such as revolutionary ideology regarding the great leader, the "theory on socio-political life," and the "theory on the successor."
- Efficiency can be judged by a regime's ability to resolve pending problems, how efficiently it copes with the material demands of the people. North Korea could be analyzed by how well its policies can solve the urgent economic problems (shortages in food, daily necessities, foreign currency and energy), diplomatic isolation and the sense of security crisis.
- Coerciveness is an important factor, whether or not a regime can force the population to obey. North Korea can be judged by

4 Here are two other studies correlating system change and the advent of crisis. H. J. Wiarda classifies crises that socialist systems face into those in ideology, institution, society, leadership, economy, morale, and international society. Howard J. Wiarda, "The Future of Marxist-Leninist Regime: Cuba in Comparative Perspective," presented at a conference, The Durability and Direction of the Four Remaining Socialist Countries: China, Vietnam, Cuba and North Korea, jointly held by the Korean Association of International Studies on 27-28 May 1994. J. Habermas offers as symptoms of crisis in a political system: crises in legitimacy, economy, rationality, and incentive. Jurgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (Boston: Bacon Press, 1973), pp. 2-4.

5 Lipset, pp. 64-86.

- analyzing the switch of the institutional and human bases from those of the Kim Il Sung regime to those of Kim Jong-il regime.
- Solidarity refers to support from allied and other countries, a matter regarding national security including domestic challenges as well as external invasion. Solidary for North Korea can be judged by its relations with socialist, capitalist and non-aligned countries on the basis of its policy line of "strengthening international revolutionary forces."

For the short term, regime stability will be affected mostly by legitimacy and coerciveness, but for long-term durability all four factors must be considered.

To forecast changes in the North Korean political system, let us also classify them by: whether they are initiated from above by Kim Jong-il, bureaucrats or the military, or from below by the masses or by an emerging citizenry; by whether they are progressive towards a new reformed society, or retrogressive towards more oppressive dictatorship or an even more closed society; whether superficial or fundamental (which could be further divided into changes in policy, leadership, regime, system or state); and whether fast or slow. Scenarios can be generated by combining legitimacy, efficiency, coerciveness and solidarity with these four variables.

Scenarios of Change

For example, if coercive power and political legitimacy weaken, then those suffering from too many shortages, especially food, could riot—which unless suppressed early could spread, gain the alignment of the suppressing forces and develop into a national revolt.

Or, if coercion remains strong but international solidarity and system legitimacy weaken, information from outside will flow in and transform the political consciousness of the people from that of loyal subjects towards something more like modern-state citizens. The people could lose their identity with the North Korean system and potentially stage not riots but civil revolu-

tion. If Pyongyang goes ahead with reform and opening in order to solve its economic problems, the truth about the outside world will penetrate, and a politically awakened group will appear. Reform will breed wealth, create a gap between rich and poor, differentiate and complicate the society, and increase the autonomy of all individuals. These are all components of civil society. People will come to realize they have been deceived by the Kims, and citizen groups centered upon technocrats, intellectuals, those who studied abroad, and university students may attempt organized demonstrations.

Third, if both international solidarity and efficiency weaken, utilitarian and reformist bureaucrats who have opposed the policies made by conservative party officers could come into power and support "gradual reform." If Kim Jong-il fails to solve problems including economic headaches from which people suffer, ruling forcefully through the ideologues from his Three Revolutions Teams who have been basis of his power, one million and three hundred thousand bureaucrats and technocrats, who have been brought up since the North Korean regime was inaugurated, might change their attitudes and even take lead in promoting reform. Over the matter of what should be the primary policy of reform and opening and how fast it should occur, disagreement between conservative and reformist groups could grow into a full-blown power struggle.

Fourth, if coerciveness and efficiency weaken, the military could even carry out a coup. If Kim Jong-il cannot hold power firmly and a vacuum appears at the top, and if complaints about shortages increase, reformist groups among regimental and battalion commanders who have relatively low loyalty to Kim Jong-il would be the ones most likely to stage a coup d'état. Unless these groups, however, would assume power early on, conservatives to protect their positions would very possibly carry out a reactionary coup. A civil war, then, could break out in North Korea.

Fifth, if the Kim Jong-il regime does handle well this difficult situation and is successful to some extent in efficiency, legitimacy, solidarity and coerciveness, it can be inaugurated on firm ground. Succession to his father's rule, which started with the Three Revolutions Teams beginning in February 1973 and his working-level leadership, would succeed—unless something drastic were to happen. In order to gain popular support through solving the economic problems he can be expected, cautiously, to develop policies for reform and opening.

The Current Status of the Kim Jong-il Regime

Legitimacy⁶

To legitimate himself Kim Jong-il is clinging tightly to the Kim Il Sung line. He has emphasized the "teachings of Kim Il Sung," created an image as *the* successor to Kim Il Sung's thought, and maintained policies to idolize himself.

First, as soon as his father died, instead of adopting new policy Kim Jong-il gave top priority to following the old line. Ever since the middle of August 1994 the North Korean media has been reporting rallies promoting the realization of Kim Il Sung's teachings. At the second anniversary of his death, Pyongyang reconfirmed that the future of North Korean socialism will be established upon the heritage of the Great Leader Kim Il Sung.

Second, the junior Kim has directed concerted efforts to solidify his position as the sole ideological successor to his late father, by presenting various theses regarding *juche* thought—five, in fact, since death of his father. For example, in a thesis entitled, "Socialism is Science" (1 November 1994), he insisted that the collapse of socialism in so many countries was not due to the failure of socialism itself, which is a science, but that true socialism had been undermined by selfish, opportunist leaders.

6 Moon-Young Huh, "The Power Footing and the Future Policy of Kim Jong Il's Regime," *Kukdong Munje*, October 1994.

He repeatedly emphasized: "The North Korean form of socialism will never face failure because it is a human-centered and scientific socialism." In a thesis, "To Place Priority on Ideological Indoctrination is a Prerequisite to Carrying Out the Great Socialist Task" (19 June 1995), he emphasized the need to intensify ideological indoctrination programs, calling upon party officials to step up efforts to arm all the people with *juche* ideology.⁷

In "The Workers Party Is the Party of Great Leader Kim Il Sung" (2 October 1995), he called upon everyone to abide faithfully by the instructions that Great Leader Kim Il Sung left behind, with the emphasis that "imperialist maneuvers to impose political and diplomatic pressure on North Korea, as well as an imperialist economic and military threats, must be repelled."

Third, for the past 20-odd years since 1973, North Korean ideologists have been engaged in strenuous campaigns to inculcate the people with the belief in the legitimacy of the junior Kim's successorship. For example, they have concocted various theories to justify the successorship, such as "the theory regarding successorship," "the theory on the successor," "the theory on the shift of generations," "the theory on the historical preparatory stage" and "the theory on Kim Il Sung's incarnation," among others. After the death of Kim Il Sung they have tried to endow the junior Kim with the same charisma his father possessed.

Fourth, since the death of Kim Il Sung, North Korean ideologists have developed another theory which claims "the Father and Great Leader (Kim Il Sung) is none other than Dear Leader

7 In this thesis, Kim Jong-il presented four warnings and guidelines: (1) the inclination of betrayers to economic gains ruins socialism, (2) individualism, private ownership, the free market system, religious idealism, pluralism and openness must be repelled, (3) the North Korean form of socialism is *Juche*-oriented collectivism and (4) no relaxation in indoctrination. *Rodong Shimmun*, 21 June 1995.

Comrade Kim Jong-il, and the Dear Leader is the Great Leader himself.”

In short, the Kim Jong-il regime has reached a high degree of legitimacy through more than twenty years of symbol fabrication, and regime legitimacy is assessed as even higher than that immediately after his father's death. He will never match his father's charisma, however, because Kim Jong-il experienced armed struggle against neither Japan nor the United States. The legitimacy of his regime, therefore, will probably maintain its high degree for a while, but as time goes by it can be expected to weaken gradually.

Coerciveness

An Institutional Foothold

First, by having been assigned to key posts in the party, the government and the military, Kim Jong-il has been sent up the power ladder. On 12 February 1974 during the 8th plenary session of the 5th-term KWP Central Committee, the party named him as sole successor.⁸

During the 6th Party Congress in October 1980, he was named a member of the Presidium of the KWP Politburo, and concurrently a member, and secretary, of the KWP Central Military Committee—thus becoming the second most powerful man in the North Korean power hierarchy. He became the supreme commander of the People's Army in December 1992, marshal of the army in April 1992, and the chairman of the National Defense Commission in April 1993. He now appears to be ruling the country in the capacity of army supreme commander and chairman of the Defense Commission.

Second, the junior Kim, even before the death of his father, held tight control of all organizations of the party, the govern-

8 *Rodong Shimmun*, 5 February 1992.

ment and the military through enforcing a "daily report system through three channels," which refer to the KWP Organization and Guidance Department, the Ministry of the State Security (secret police) and the Ministry Public Security (police), and the Armed Forces General Political Bureau.

Third, since the death of Kim Il Sung, Pyongyang has concentrated on enhancing the junior Kim's image, depicting him as a "man of virtue and benevolence who works only for the people." The media emphasizes the need to intensify *juche*-oriented ideological indoctrination programs, but they also have stressed that under the junior Kim's leadership, people's ideological value will be evaluated, unlike in the past, more upon their current loyalty towards the leader rather than upon their class (that is, their family background), which had for decades been the central criterion for favorable or unfavorable treatment in North Korea. Recent trends indicate that in order to obtain the unity of the people the ruling hierarchy has employed a double-faced policy of appeasement and yet simultaneously, coercion. As a small but typical example, the government was reported recently to have ordered some Pyongyang residents, considered "impure elements," to move out of the city and live in remote farm areas.

Fourth, the installment of Kim Jong-il in December 1991 as the supreme commander of the army, in place of his father, was a major step towards solidifying his successorship. Since then, in particular, Pyongyang has enforced a military-first policy calling upon the people to prioritize military affairs before anything else and ordering the population to provide soldiers with moral and material support.

Meanwhile in an effort to solidify his position as the supreme commander, Kim Jong-il in April 1992 promoted some 660 generals simultaneously, even pinning the stars on them in person. Since the death of Kim Il Sung he has rarely appeared in public, but he does occasionally visit military units, an indication that he resorts to the military to strengthen his political position.

In any nation where the power succession process is abnormal, military support is the key to keeping power. In an interesting move, the junior Kim raised the 25 April anniversary of founding of the Korean People's Army to the rare status of national holiday.

Main Figures Backing Kim Jong-il's Leadership Position

Three aged marshals, Armed Forces Minister Choe Kwang, Public Security Minister Paek Hak-rim and bodyguard chief Li Ul-sul, appear to be among the major figures backing Kim Jong-il's leadership position. Currently most general-grade officers in their fifties can be said to be loyal to Kim Jong-il, if for no other reason because they were promoted by Kim Jong-il himself.⁹

Such figures as Vice Marshal Kim Kwang-jin (deputy armed forces minister), Vice Marshal Kim Yong-chun (chief of the general staff of the KPA), and Vice Marshal Cho Myong-rok (chief of the Armed Forces General Political Bureau) also appear to be faithful followers of Kim Jong-il.

Kim Jong-il began to establish a nepotic ruling system as far back as the 1970s when he was named Party Organization and Guidance Department chief. At his instructions his relatives or close schoolmates were placed in important positions in the party, the government and the military; these people now occupy some 90% of ministerial-level posts in the KWP and the government.

In 1973, Kim Jong-il organized the so-called "Three-Revolution Team" under his direct control. Team members were chosen from among college students, given intensive ideological training, and then dispatched to schools, workshops and farms in every corner of the country, ostensibly to supervise the three

9 Banning Garrett & Bonnie Glaser, "Looking Across the Yalu: Chinese Assessments of North Korea," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 35, No. 6 (June 1995).

(ideological, cultural and technological) revolution movement. Their real mission, however, has been to get rid of all anti-Kim elements opposed to the hereditary succession plan.

In short, the regime's organizational and personal coerciveness will probably continue its intensity over the short run, and perhaps even for the middle and long terms. If economic difficulties continue, however, a dispute over the appropriate reform and opening policy will probably be raised within the elite who are loyal to Kim Jong-il. Moreover, if relations with Western countries improve rapidly, we cannot exclude the possibility of weakening coerciveness against the population.

Efficiency

Currently Pyongyang has been pressing ahead with a three-year stop-gap economic plan (1994–1996), adopted after an unsuccessful completion of its previous economic plan (1987–1993) and designed to place priority on agriculture, light industry and foreign trade.¹⁰

This indicates that it now faces an urgent need to solve the shortages of (1) food (2) commodities and (3) foreign exchange.

First, the status of the grain shortage has become a matter of life or death. As part of its efforts to boost grain production, in December 1994 North Korea converted a cooperative farm in Mangyongdae, near Pyongyang, into a state farm, then established a "county agricultural complex" in Sunchon County combining some 20 cooperative farms. In May 1995 it embarked upon a vigorous diplomatic campaign to obtain food aid from abroad, for example, by dispatching Li Song-rok, chairman of the Committee for the Promotion of External Trade, to Japan. The result was contracts with foreign countries to import a total of 1.1 million tons of rice: 300,000 tons of rice in trade from

10 An analysis of a plenary session of the North Korean Workers' Party Central Committee and a Supreme People's Assembly session in December 1993 (RINU, 1993).

Thailand, 54,000 tons of corn in trade from a US company, 150,000 tons of free rice from South Korea, and 150,000 tons of free rice and 350,000 tons of rice on credit from Japan. Heavy floods over July and August in both 1995 and 1996 brought about severe damage not only to farms but also to much infrastructure including transportation and communication networks and power plants, thus worsening the already aggravated economic situation. North Korea is expected to suffer from a shortage of some 2.5 to 3 million tons of grain in 1996.¹¹

Second, despite its emphasis on light industrial production, commodity production still relies on small-to-medium or local factories. Moreover, Pyongyang has been calling upon everyone to speed up the so-called August 3 Commodity Production Project, which is designed to encourage the workers to utilize all locally available resources for commodity production—but the stark reality is that the economy has little chance to recover from its chronic stagnation due to the lack of raw materials, investment and advanced technology.

Third, North Korea's foreign trade volume has been in continuous decline. Pyongyang has recently escalated its efforts to boost foreign trade, for example by inviting some eleven American business delegations to visit North Korea, and by dispatching an Asia-Pacific Peace Committee delegation (headed by Li Jong-hyok) and another delegation from the Committee for Korean Residents Abroad (headed by Chon Kyong-nam) to the U.S., in the first half of 1995. In the meantime, the DPRK Committee for the Promotion of External Economic Cooperation has been struggling heroically to induce foreign investment in the free economic and trade zone in the Rajin-Sonbong area by holding various briefings in Beijing and other parts of China.¹²

11 DPRK Flood Damage Rehabilitation Committee Report, 26 September 1995.

12 *Joong-ang Ilbo*, 5 September 1995.

However, Pyongyang has yet to gain any success from such efforts,¹³ though a North Korean diplomat stationed in Paris was reported to have told reporters there that some two hundred business groups from the US, the United Kingdom and Japan have visited North Korea, and that such American firms as Coca Cola and GM have already begun investing.¹⁴

Fourth, Pyongyang's foreign policy has focused on improving relations with the Washington and Tokyo, especially since the conclusion of the Geneva nuclear framework agreement with the United States in October 1994. Such a policy trend should be cited not only as part of Pyongyang's political efforts to cope with its current diplomatic isolation but also as part of its strenuous efforts to induce economic aid from them.

In short, although the Kim Jong-il regime is trying to solve pending problems through food diplomacy, limited opening policy for foreign trade and improving relations with the US, it suffers from fundamental problems caused by structural contradiction within the socialist system, exhaustion of its resources, and faulty investment conditions including infrastructure. The efficiency of the regime will, therefore, maintain the status quo for a short time. It will probably weaken, however, over the middle and long term.

Solidarity

First, despite the collapse of the socialist camp, Pyongyang is still sticking to its efforts to maintain solidarity with the socialist or "progressive" forces of the world. In 1994 North Korea sent an air force delegation to Iran, sent other military delegations, led by Choe Kwang and others, to China, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos and Cuba, and invited military delegations from China, Cambo-

13 As of 1994, a total of 149 foreign firms are reported to be operating in North Korea, among them 139 (90%) are funded by the pro-Pyongyang Korean Residents Association in Japan. *Joong-ang Ilbo*, 26 September 1995.

14 *Chosun Ilbo*, 13 November 1995.

dia, Vietnam, Laos and Nigeria to visit Pyongyang. But in its diplomacy with China and Russia, Pyongyang appears to be placing heavier importance on promoting economic, rather than ideological ties. In fact, Russia virtually gave an ideological brush-off to North Korea in September 1995 by informing it of Moscow's decision to scrap the existing Moscow-Pyongyang friendship treaty, a military pact concluded in 1961 and stipulating Russia's automatic support of North Korea in case of war. Currently Moscow and Pyongyang are mulling over a new treaty to replace the old one.

Second, Pyongyang still poses as a member and a strong supporter of the nonaligned bloc by announcing its determination to promote solidarity with the Third World.¹⁵

But its diplomatic activities in the Third World have been on the decline, mainly due to lack of money; for example, in 1995 alone, North Korea closed down its embassies in twelve countries (Hungary, Portugal, Burkina Faso, and Burundi in March, Tunisia, Cameroon, Congo, Mozambique in April, Nicaragua in June, and so on).¹⁶

Third, since its engagement in negotiations with the US and Japan for the improvement of relations, Pyongyang has escalated its anti-Seoul propaganda activities. This attitude should be cited as part of its policies to keep its populace constantly under the status of vigilance against their main enemy. The ruling hierarchy until recently has been able to justify its revolutionary policies by spurring the people to devote themselves to anti-imperialist struggles, labelling the US and Japan the sworn enemies. Now, however, Seoul is the new bogeyman. Domestic indoctrination programs regarding the anti-imperialist struggles are still under way, but the political decision to improve relations with these sworn enemies has in fact weakened the "popular

15 Joint editorial by newspapers of Korean Workers Party, the army and the Youth League. *Rodong Shimmun*, 1 January 1995.

16 *Kookmin Ilbo*, 19 September 1995.

vigilance against imperialism." One noteworthy point is that quite contrary to its anti-Seoul activities, Pyongyang has been seeking ways to induce South Korean businessmen into promoting economic ties with North Korea—but over the head of the South Korean government. In fact, inter-Korean trade volume recorded some \$190 million in 1994 and \$165 million in the first half of 1995.¹⁷

In short, North Korea has improved somewhat its relations with the Western countries in the post-Cold War world environment. Due, however, to the fall of the socialist bloc as well as to its own economic difficulties, it cannot solidify the relations with international revolutionary forces as it had previously enjoyed. So far as the Kim Jong-il regime keeps an ideological rather than pragmatic attitude towards them, however, the North Korean relations with international revolutionary forces can be expected to continue in the short run, or perhaps even quite a while.

The Future of the Kim Jong-il Regime

Stability

It should be cited that through twenty years of intensified campaigns to solidify his ideological and political footing, the legitimacy and coerciveness of Kim Jong-il's successorship had already been secured while his father was alive. Since his father's death, the junior Kim has also been successful in equipping his leadership position with solidarity and efficiency, and therefore, his position as the successor should be cited as stable, even though he has yet to inherit officially the two supreme titles.

Then what is the delay? He appears simply to be refraining from taking over power officially—not because he lacks legitimacy but because the situation in and out of the country is not stable enough to guarantee a long term of his leadership. The

17 ROK National Unification Board, *Monthly Trends of South-North Economic Exchanges*, No. 49, July 1995.

ruling hierarchy in Pyongyang is facing an urgent need to boost its sinking economy and to find solutions to unclear issues before it can enthrone Kim Jong-il officially as head of state.

The ruling hierarchy seems to be trying to buy time for solving these problems, on the pretext that the nation is still in a mourning period that will last until July 1997. It is likely that the junior Kim will refrain from taking over the post of the party general secretary and the presidency until July 1997 or, if a buffer period is added, until the end of 1997 or early 1998.

Durability

Regarding the durability of Kim Jong-il's leadership, two contrary viewpoints still argue.

Some scholars maintained that he will probably remain in power only six to eighteen months. This view, however, overlooks the extremely unusual North Korean political system, the strict civil control measures in which everyone is brainwashed that they must behave as loyal subjects of a feudalist king. The people have been well tamed to adapt themselves to the Stalinist North Korean form of socialism and have extremely little or no idea about the outside world.

Some North Korea watchers on the other hand believe Kim Jong-il's regime may survive seven to ten years or more—but this view too easily overlooks fundamental deficiencies in the political system. North Korea has registered minus economic growth every year since 1990, and the government has lost the capability to prevent corruption from spreading all over the country. Remedies such as a partial economic opening designed to defend the current system, if not preceded by fundamental reforms in the system itself, will fail to solve the economic stagnation and corruption.

This writer would like to predict that Kim Jong-il's leadership will face difficulties in three to five years after his enthronement. He did establish a solid foundation for succession, in terms of

legitimacy and coerciveness, and will thus face no problems in ascending to power officially. But in due course he is sure to face the need to revise or reform the system, and discord among members of the inner circle of the ruling hierarchy may well surface. In the meantime, the North Korean populace will wake up to the absurdity of the North Korean form of socialism that drives them to be satisfied with their serfdom. When the populace begins to demand rights as citizens of a modern state, then the Stalinist regime in Pyongyang will face a severe crisis.

It is another question, however, whether the collapse of Kim Jong-il's regime will mean the end of the communist regime in North Korea.