

Succession in North Korea

Grief and fear

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It seems unlikely that Kim Jong Un will want to reform North Korea, but even less likely that the regime can go on resisting change

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IF NORTH KOREA were not so tragic and dangerous, the scenes broadcast to the world after the funeral of Kim Jong Il would have been comic. Waves of mourners outdid each other in grief. Men, women and children tore at their clothes in homage to a man who for 17 years kept his people in a state of isolation, poverty and indoctrination unparalleled in the modern world. According to the state news agency, “even the sky seemed to writhe in grief” at the demise of the “great saint born of Heaven”. There was pathetic gratitude when tin mugs of warm milk were put into trembling hands—proof, it was reported, of the solicitousness of Kim Jong Un, third son of the “Dear Leader” and heir to his murderous regime.

In his glass coffin, the dead Kim had lain in the Kumsusan mausoleum, his head on a white cushion, his body draped in a red blanket whose colour matched the flowers—his cherished Begonia kimjongilia—that surrounded his corpse. If the mass grieving filmed in Pyongyang was a mixture of brainwashed reverence, genuine fear of the unknown, choreography, and the seditious risk of looking nonchalant, the images of the young Un at the foot of his father’s coffin were a study in how to make a ruling clique look sombre, steadfast and united. That was quite a feat for what by North Korean standards was a hastily arranged succession. For over two years the Dear Leader had been ailing, which was not much time to groom Kim Jong Un—his father had decades to cement his succession to Kim Il Sung, the Great Leader, who died in 1994. Kim Jong Il’s own death on December 17th, of heart failure, came as no surprise. But next April is the 100th anniversary of Kim Il Sung’s birth, and his son was to have overseen the celebrations, which North Koreans have been promised will mark the country’s elevation to something like developed-country status. Presided over by the callow Kim Jong Un, the milestone will now look even more hollow.

The dead Kim has left a failing, nuclear-armed, totalitarian state in the hands of a youth who has rarely if ever made a public utterance, and who is so unknown outside his small circle of advisers that it is not clear whether he is 27 or 28. He may have got the job in part because his elder brother, Kim Jong Nam, was caught trying to enter Japan to go to Tokyo Disneyland in 2001; he subsequently moved to, and gambled in, Macau.

Just 15 months after he was named as heir-apparent, Kim Jong Un was officially dubbed the “Great Successor” on December 19th, when state media finally reported his father’s death. Nominally, at

least, that puts North Korea's 24m people, many of whom are so destitute they supplement their meagre maize-based subsistence with grass and whatever else they can forage, under his heel. They are spied on by neighbours, and live in a fearful uncertainty, not knowing what might befall them or their families if they step out of line.

To keep order at home, and enemies abroad at bay, Mr Kim inherits a standing army of perhaps 1m soldiers, with ballistic missiles aimed at South Korea and Japan, and a small arsenal of nuclear weapons. China and America, which keep troops on his country's northern and southern flanks respectively, have been pressing the regime to give them up; but their disagreements on how to treat the rogue regime have not helped defang it. The fate of Muammar Qaddafi after he gave up his nuclear-weapons programme will not encourage Mr Kim to abandon North Korea's.

He is not alone at the controls. Standing conspicuously behind the heir are an apparent troika of regents: his aunt, Kim Kyong Hui, her husband, Jang Song Taek, both longtime confidants of his father, and another ally of his father, General Ri Yong Ho, the boy king's umbilical cord to the army. Together with his late father, the regents appear to have purged potential rivals and promoted allies in clearing the path for succession.

China, North Korea's closest ally and begrudging patron, has, at the urging of Pyongyang, ratified the ascension in its official condolences, addressed to the nation "under the leadership of Comrade Kim Jong Un". South Korea and America chose not to convey official sorrow at the passing of a dictator who terrorised their countries with bombings, kidnappings and nuclear provocations. When South Korea indicated it would allow only a small delegation to travel north to express their condolences, Pyongyang's propaganda machinery, true to form, threatened to meet any obstructions from Seoul with "unpredictable catastrophic consequences".

Avoiding chaos

Since the elder Kim first fell gravely ill from a suspected stroke in 2008, North Korea-watchers in Washington, DC and elsewhere have predicted that a chaotic succession would be the greatest threat to the regime. However, after the 51-hour hiatus before Mr Kim's death was announced, many say that every step has been taken to signal, both to outsiders and to the nation, that the country remains firmly in the grip of its founding family.

Normality in a strange country

The organs of state have begun churning out paeans to the young Kim, who appears set to assume his father's huge collection of titles, including (most prosaically) supreme leader of the revolutionary armed forces, and head of the Korean Workers' Party. Visitors to North Korea say that after more than 60 years there is still reverence for the Kim name, partly because of nostalgia for Kim Il Sung, the revolutionary father of the nation, who had the good fortune to die just before a famine killed about 1m people and the state's food-distribution system collapsed. Kim Jong Il has overseen mass starvation and diverted huge resources to his dream of building a nuclear weapon to blackmail the outside world. But his subjects have no avenues to express dissatisfaction; and, for many, the Kim family mythology—with all its fascistic xenophobia—is all they have to believe in.

What is more, the clique of Kim family members, generals and senior government officials whose loyalty has stood the test of purges may have as much to lose as their young protégé from the collapse of the regime. Bradley Martin, author of a comprehensive account of the Kim dynasty,

believes the ruling clique has every reason to fear the loss of its privileges. That keeps personal ambitions in check. When communism fell in Eastern Europe, North Korean media showed videos of formerly high-ranking East German officials reduced to selling sausages on the street. "This was intended to remind the elite where their loyalties needed to lie," Mr Martin says.

They are not the only beneficiaries of the regime. In Pyongyang visitors say life has improved recently for Kim family loyalists, which may explain the berserk expressions of grief. Though power cuts persist, tens of thousands of cars throng the streets, compared with empty thoroughfares just five years ago, and a middle class is developing that is separate from the power elites.

There are now hundreds of thousands of mobile-phone users on the regime's network, with international calls for some. And a few department stores are well-stocked, with no need any longer to usher foreign visitors quickly past shops with prices, but no goods, on their shelves. Indeed, Kim Jong Il's last public appearance was at an upscale Pyongyang supermarket; its staff, it was reported, wailed and threw themselves into each other's arms on hearing of his death.

Foreigners who travel to other cities say these too have some residents with what one visitor calls "semi-disposable income". In one city, Hamhung, a charity worker reports high-heeled shoes, clean imported clothing, nice winter jackets, all alongside tattered old clothing. The benefits, though, come to those with family connections in the party and the army and to those with relatives in China. That allows them to take part in the semi-tolerated black-markets which have sprung up in the void left by the collapse of the food-distribution system.

Yet even in the early months of the regime, internal stability cannot be taken for granted. Surrounded by crusty generals three times his age, an insecure young leader might just resort to hot-headed measures to assert himself. Analysts point to rumours that he helped orchestrate murderous attacks on South Korean targets in 2010 as evidence of a brattish malevolence. Old tensions between the army and the party could resurface, especially over the former's involvement in the cross-border trade that fosters the black markets.

Perhaps the biggest risk to the regime's stability comes from the black markets and the taste for freedoms and better living they bring. Near the border with China, North Koreans can use Chinese mobile networks to call South Korea, either directly or by paying brokers to put them through. DVDs on sale on the black market show what life in the outside world, especially South Korea, is like. Growing understanding of North Korea's economic backwardness seems likely to breed hunger for change.

Food or bullets?

From a dictator's perspective, the markets may be the trickiest issue to manage. Shut them down and risk revolt; leave them alone and a growing number of wealthy traders could form a threatening constituency. Kim Jong Il experienced this. These illegal bastions of capitalism had sprung up throughout much of the country, establishing a semblance of a working economy alongside the nonfunctioning state system, and enriching a dangerous new merchant class. A 2009 currency confiscation wiped out the wealth of the most successful traders, but the move brought with it hunger and widespread anger.

Adding to the potential pressure on the young Kim, 2012 marks the 100th anniversary of his revered grandfather's birth when North Korea is to become a "strong and prosperous nation". Some believe Mr Kim will mark the occasion by using a phrase attributed to him, that "food is more important than bullets." Dovish Chinese analysts express their usual hope that there will be a shift toward

economic liberalisation. For years Chinese leaders tried in vain to convince Kim Jong Il to embrace Chinese-style economic reforms; they might yet choose to push those reforms with renewed vigour. Optimists suggest that, to justify reform, the young Kim could argue that his father built the nuclear weapons that made his nation “strong”; now it is the time to make it “prosperous”.

But pessimists, whose views North Korea’s recent history has tended to support, argue that the elite will be reluctant to abandon the patronage and rent-seeking from which they have benefited. Much of the investment from Chinese firms has gone to secure mineral rights, providing little benefit to the people at large. Rajin-Sonbong, a special economic zone near China’s border, has lingered as a failed promise of reform and opening for years. Korea Taepung International Investment Group, which is trying to strike mineral deals and promote Rajin-Sonbong, is overseen directly by central leaders, including Mr Kim’s uncle, Jang Song Taek, who has done business with the Chinese for years.

It is hard to see how the economy could be modernised without abruptly destroying the state’s paternalistic ruling mythology. Much of the dark interior of North Korea is bereft not only of consumer goods but also of trustworthy information, on anything from prices to politics. Although an increasing number of people, especially in the border areas, are aware of the vast disparity between capitalist South Korea and their own workers’ paradise, defectors say many still do not fully grasp how wide that chasm is. As one defector puts it, explaining why his relatives cling to their belief in the Kim family state when he sends them cash from South Korea: “There is a gap between what you know and what you believe.”

North Koreans are educated from early childhood to believe in the purity and superiority of their race, in the evils of the Americans and the Japanese, and of their need for an all-powerful, protecting figure to lead them. That explains the lure of *juche* (loosely, self-reliance, or autarky), which is the sole ideological pillar of this mythology. Any more information would expose how pathetically the Kim family regime has failed to provide what even their poor cousins in neighbouring China mostly take for granted: not just food, but transport links, and fuel and electricity to heat homes in the winter.

As it is, North Koreans need only look to the plunging value of their local currency to realise how fragile their situation is. The official rate is 15 won per Chinese yuan. Charity workers say that a black-market exchange rate of 340 won in June had plunged to 600 won in November. With average salaries of 3,000-6,000 won per month the currency is, in effect, worthless. That helps explain why much of the population is stunted by malnutrition.

China, the only power with much influence over the country, is less troubled by the long-term grinding suffering of the North Koreans than by the prospect of a leadership vacuum leading suddenly to economic collapse and a flood of refugees. Such a prospect threatens to cause wider instability. If China tried to control the ensuing chaos by moving troops to the North Korean side of the border, hackles would rise in South Korea, which fears China’s territorial demands on a piece of the peninsula that it considers almost sacredly Korean. It would also send shock waves through Asian countries fearful of Chinese expansionism.

The nuclear option

In the case of full-scale collapse, American troops stationed south of the 38th parallel would try to secure North Korea’s nuclear, chemical and biological weapons and their production facilities. The locations of some of these are known—but there may be others. Such a move could lead to confrontation between American and Chinese troops on North Korean soil. America would also feel

bound to support Seoul against China. For its part, South Korea, whose economy is 30 times larger than North Korea's, sees uncontrolled unification, and the refugee crisis it would probably create, as a huge threat to its stability.

Kim Jong Un will live in interesting times

These fears are real, but they have led North Korea's neighbours to accept a worse evil—the status quo. Instead of abandoning the regime and hoping it would collapse, they have been vainly negotiating for it to abandon the nuclear weapons on which its survival depends.

Under the late Kim the North Koreans appeared twice to promise to denuclearise, but both times they went back on their word, as well as selling nuclear technology to rogue states elsewhere. The six-party talks with North Korea, chaired by China and including America, South Korea, Japan and Russia, have been stalled since 2008.

America's then defence secretary, Robert Gates, took a tough line on North Korea's deceptions, saying: "I'm tired of buying the same horse twice." Yet just before Mr Kim's death, America was negotiating ways to restart food aid to North Korea, and there was speculation that it was seeking nuclear concessions in the process.

Park Syung-je, of the Asia Strategy Institute in Seoul, believes the young Mr Kim will play upon his father's death to recommence the merry-go-round. The North Korean strategy, "provoke, negotiate, rinse, repeat", will, he believes, make fools of its six-party interlocutors again.

Perhaps the most confounding aspect of North Korea is that, however much it has depended on Chinese investment and Western aid since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the outside world cannot do much to influence its internal dynamics. So deprived are its people of both external and internal sources of information that the regime has been able to assert control. So dependent are they on its favour that North Koreans have become accustomed to policing themselves.

Yet the country that Mr Kim inherits is not as unchanging as it appears. Mobile phones, cross-border profiteering, corruption and inequality have all flourished. The failed currency reforms led to unprecedented public anger. A few outsiders with contacts inside the country say North Koreans quietly mock the young heir who, educated in part at a smart Swiss boarding school, is hardly cut from the same revolutionary cloth as his grandfather.

The Kim dynasty's biggest achievement is that, despite its fearsome cruelty, its leaders have twice died of natural causes and have even been mourned by their subjects. But even those who think the young Mr Kim will have a grip on power for some time doubt that they can keep it up. "I don't envy the boy ruler," says Mr Martin. "I just don't think he's going to die in bed."

P.S.

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