

Kim Jong-un: Too Young for Coronation?

Written by Key-young Son

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KEY-YOUNG SON, DEC 21 2011

Much has been written about why the sudden death of Chairman Kim Jong-il and the premature leadership of his youthful, 29-year-old son Jong-un could be contributing to the fragility, or possible downfall, of the North Korean regime. Much less attention, however, has been paid to why the new North Korean leadership could still remain stable and fare well through many of the anticipated hardships. I will bet on the latter and offer three reasons from the perspectives of regional politics, economy and dynastic succession.

From the perspective of regional politics, North Korea's neighboring countries desire its survival and stability. China and South Korea appeared to be moving swiftly to ensure stability in North Korea. Only three days after Kim Jong-il's death, Chinese President Hu Jintao visited the North Korean Embassy in Beijing to express his condolences. China's top military, communist party and government agencies sent the letters of condolences to North Korea, officially endorsing the junior Kim's leadership. South Korea's civil society has been divided over how to respond to the issue of sending condolences to North Korea. However, President Lee Myung-bak convened an emergency cabinet meeting and made an unusually quick decision to express condolences to the North Korean people for the loss of their leader.

For the past two decades following the end of the Cold War, China and South Korea have been caught in a competition to deepen their influence over North Korea economically and politically, whereas North Korea strove to maintain its policy line of *juche* (self-reliance) from the meddling of the neighboring powers. The North's *songun* or military-first policy is also part of the North Korean leadership's struggles to maintain its own socialist and dynastic system by developing nuclear weapons and militarizing the entire society. Nevertheless, China has solidified its position as the patron and guarantor of North Korea's security and the tell-tale evidence was the fact that Kim Jong-il had visited China four times in an 18-month period before his death to explore the North Korean way of emulating China's remarkable economic success. Even though inter-Korean relations suffered from a deadlock under the Lee administration, pundits view that the next South Korean government to be elected late next year would take a more friendly action toward North Korea in order not to lose its influences over North Korea.

From an economic perspective, North Korea is not a closed state against the conventional belief. It is true that the United States and Japan had almost completely restricted bilateral trade with North Korea in recent years, but North Korea maintains a system of almost free trade with China. According to the (South) Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency, the total volume of North Korea's foreign trade reached US \$4.17 billion last year, of which its trade with China assumed US \$3.47 billion or 83 percent of the total. Last year's total trade volume refers to a 22.3 percent increase from that of the previous year and it is the first time that the trade with China has passed the 80 percent mark. In fact, North Korea's trade dependence on China is remarkable when we look at the recent trend: 48.5 percent in 2004, 52.6 percent in 2005, 56.7 percent in 2006, 67.1 percent in 2007, 73 percent in 2008, and 78.5 percent in 2009. The Chinese leadership is expected to strategically deal with the issue of North Korea's economic viability as an independent state by mixing assistance and trade in a skillful manner.

From the perspective of political transition, we can say that one of the easiest ways to achieve political legitimacy is dynastic succession. The junior Kim had been selected as an heir to the ailing leader two years ago and then promoted last year to a four-star general and vice chairman of the Central Military Commission of the Workers Party. The junior Kim has been shrouded in a thick human veil comprising his relatives and royal followers. Though

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extremely short compared with the grooming period of more than 20 years for his father, the two-year-long leadership training and his current position at the helms of the military will bestow him with some sense of authority. In an interesting comparison, an average age of kings during the Joseon Kingdom at the time of enthronement was 24. Ironically, North Korea still uses Joseon as its official state name and Kim Jong-un is 29 years old.

My real concern is the junior Kim's inexperience. Living up to his youthfulness, he might try to tighten his grip on power in an unscrupulous manner by forgetting the art of ruling his grandfather and father had mastered by manipulating a balance of power amongst the North's power elites, divided largely into the military brass and the technocrats. Any serious blunder in connection with redirecting the country's economic and diplomatic affairs could lead to irreversible challenges by the competing elite groups in North Korea. We cannot rule out another possibility of his eldest brother, Jong-nam, now based in China, seeking to recapture the leadership of the nation, now that his father who had estranged him from the leadership competition is gone for good. In conclusion, Kim Jong-un is not too young to rule the country as a leader who carries an automatically granted legitimacy as a son of the late ruler, but is simply inexperienced in handling a number of state affairs that had been a tall order even for his shrewd father.

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