

The Kim Regimes: Two Disappearances and a Funeral

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By Mark Tokola

As of April 27, Kim Jung-un has not been seen in public since April 11. His absence has created speculation regarding his whereabouts and the status of his health. CNN has reported that the U.S. government is taking Kim's absence seriously. It is taken as significant that Kim Jong-un was not present for the April 15 "Day of the Sun" ceremonies making the birthday of his grandfather, Kim Il-sung, North Korea's most important holiday. He also failed to appear on April 25 at the 88th anniversary commemoration of the founding of the Korean People's Army.

There have been reports that South Korean authorities have not detected any unusual activity in North Korea, which is an interesting but not definitive data point. If Kim Jong-un were convalescing but in charge, there would be no particular reason for unusual activity. Even if he were seriously ill, that might be kept secret within top circles while they were making decisions regarding succession. If troops were being moved, or confined to quarters, that would be notable, but that seems not to be the case. We are in the dark.

Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, and Kim Jong-un have all had their periods of absence, so it's possible that we've seen this play before. But, would it be a repeat of Kim Jong-il's 2008 long absence, Kim Jong-un's 2014 disappearance, or Kim Jong-il's 2011 death? It is hard to know, and it may take time for the truth to emerge.

In 2008, Kim Jong-il went missing. He failed to appear for the April Olympic torch ceremony and, like Kim Jong-un, did not attend an important anniversary commemoration, the 60th anniversary of the founding of the DPRK. After months of absence, and speculation about whether he was alive, the North Korean government denied reports of Kim Jong-il's death, saying that he had been ill but his condition was not life-threatening.

In March 2009, North Korean news outlets reported that Kim Jong-il had participated in national elections and had been reelected (unanimously) to the Supreme People's Assembly. In April 2009, the North Korean government released a video showing Kim Jong-il visiting factories, apparently from November and December of 2008. If it seems surprising that Kim Jong-il could have been out of public view for so long, it is partly because we have become accustomed to Kim Jong-un's much more public persona. Kim Jong-il was habitually secluded and secretive. He did not even speak in public.

It seemed apparent from Kim Jong-il's weakened condition after he reappeared that he had probably suffered a stroke in 2008 and had undergone a long convalescence. From 2009 on, the state of his health was followed closely by observers. North Korean state media reported, two days after the fact, that he had died of a heart attack on December 17, 2011. Even with Kim Jong-un having been prepared to step into the leadership, it took days for the North Korean government to acknowledge that Kim Jong-il had died. This led some observers to question whether it might have taken that long for Kim Jong-un to take the controls of power.

The North Korean government said that Kim Jong-il had died on his private train, exhausted from having worked himself to death on behalf of the state. This is a common trope in North Korean propaganda: the Kims sacrifice themselves for the good of the nation. South Korean analysts have questioned the entire episode, pointing out that the train had been stationary at the reported time of death, and that the weather was too cold for Kim Jong-il in his weakened state to be out travelling. They consider it likely that he died at home, but the story about the train was concocted to better support the narrative of Kim Jong-il's having died "on the job."

Kim Jong-un has had his own periods of absence. On September 3, 2014, he was seen at a concert in Pyongyang, and then he disappeared, not reappearing until October 14. His absence from the October 10 anniversary of the founding of the Korean Workers Party led observers to question whether he was gravely ill. It was recalled that he had walked with a distinct limp during the July 8, 2014 memorial service commemorating the 20th anniversary of the death of Kim Il-sung.

North Korea does not have a rules-based system for succession. Having one would be to admit that was an alternative to the supreme ruler. The system depends upon the appearance of absolute, personal control even though governing functions are necessarily delegated in ways that are not clear to outsiders.

Kim Jong-il's long illness, starting in 2008, made it necessary to provide for a succession. Although Kim Jong-un's emergence seemed surprising at the time, it is clear in retrospect that he was being groomed to rule during years of increasing responsibilities and conferred titles.

Although Kim Jong-un has now ruled for ten years, he is still young (probably 36) and his children are very young. Far from having planned a succession, he almost certainly has resisted doing so lest he create a situation in which he could be replaced. Although there is speculation regarding who might succeed Kim Jong-un, those are only educated guesses.

If the rumors prove accurate, and Kim Jon-un is incapacitated or dead, South Korea and the United States may face a difficult decision in how to treat whichever successor emerges. Someone may claim to be the new ruler, but that person may or may not be firmly in charge. Would it be prudent to quickly acknowledge that person as the new ruler in order to facilitate a rapid diplomatic outreach, or would it be better to wait and see whether the purported successor is able to consolidate power?

A delay in acknowledging a succession might be taken by the new ruler as a hostile act, making diplomacy more difficult to start. Too much early support might alienate the successor's successor, or might even tip the balance against a potentially better outcome such as a rule by committee rather

than a single personality. Accurate intelligence about the inner workings of Pyongyang would help the South Korean and American governments make such a decision, but if an uncertain situation emerges in the coming days, weeks or months, it may end up being a gamble.

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