

Four Possible Post-Kim Jong-un Regimes

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By Ken Gause, Chris Steinitz, and Elizabeth Yang

Over the last week, there has been a raft of speculation across the Pyongyang watching community about the health and whereabouts of the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un. The spate of articles that have appeared in the international media have tended to focus on theories surrounding Kim's health (including that he is dead) as well as possible successors. Much of that may be idle speculation, according to statements by the South Korean government; nevertheless, the matter of succession in North Korea is certainly one that warrants strong consideration.

Fact: Kim is Unhealthy

Rumors aside, it is a widely known fact that Kim Jong-un is not healthy and there are valid concerns for his longevity. He is overweight, an excessive smoker, and an enthusiastic drinker. These underlying health issues, combined with the stress of running a brutal dictatorship, developing an illicit nuclear weapons program, running a network to evade multiple layers of international sanctions, and evading the COVID virus, give Kim's doctors and the international community ample cause for concern. Whether he is currently ill or only taking rest, it is worth considering what governance of North Korea might look like if Kim's seat were to become suddenly unoccupied.

Governance in Succession

The North Korean constitution does not discuss succession, and the only *de facto* practice to date in North Korea has been hereditary succession along patriarchal lines. However, there have been significant shifts over the last year that reveal some of Kim Jong-un's intentions in changing historical North Korean decision-making framework for future governance.

Kim Jong-un's fundamental challenge since becoming Supreme Leader has been to maintain and expand his legitimacy as ruler. As such, he has consistently worked to weaken those elements of the state apparatus that could check his authority. The most commonly cited example of his power consolidation is the execution of his uncle, Jang Song-thaek, who held considerable influence over the Kim family's finances and relations with China. Yet there are other examples. Kim Jong-un eschewed the *songun* (military first) policy of his father, and has regularly rotated the military's top brass to ensure that they serve only at his behest. At the same time, he has reestablished the Korea Workers' Party as the center of gravity within North Korea's political system.

Over the past year, Kim Jong-un gelded the Organizational Guidance Department (OGD), the country's preeminent surveillance organ. In April 2019, Kim replaced Choe Ryong-hae as head of the Organizational Guidance Department (OGD) with Ri Man-gon, demonstrating the Supreme Leader's power over the OGD. In December, Ri Man-gon lost his position as vice chairman of the Korea Workers' Party, further weakening the OGD's ability to surveil and countermand orders put in place by Kim Jong-un's office and the Politburo. At the same time, Kim elevated his sister to first vice director status within the Central Committee, suggesting that she may have assumed a powerful role in the OGD. While the OGD retains its critical functions, these changes have likely curbed its ability to conduct politics.

These moves created political space for Kim Jong-un to act as the Supreme Leader. As a third generation leader, Kim needed a regime whose key actors follow his guidance and would not interfere in any politics, but he lacked the political legitimacy that Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il possessed. Instead, the North Korean elites judge his credibility through his actions and the success of his policies. Given the challenges facing his country, Kim Jong-un needs all the political space he can buy.

Yet should Kim Jong-un become incapacitated or die, his successor will likely face a legitimacy deficit. It is likely that Kim's efforts to subdue other power centers in the regime will buy his successor some time, but a decision on a future decision-making structure would likely emerge quickly. We see four possible outcomes for a successor regime.

Kim Family Reigns Supreme

The most likely scenario is that a member of the Kim family emerges as the Supreme Leader. The Kim family is the surest source of legitimacy for the next North Korean regime. And while a power struggle among factions is possible, any stakeholder who attempts to seize complete control risks turning the establishment against themselves. In any totalitarian state, elites tend to avoid high-intensity struggles for top positions when they can choose to push their agenda through other established means. As long as the Kim family can continue to deliver some modicum of domestic policy success, it stands to reason that others will not easily attempt to usurp its legitimacy.

The challenge is that in the near-to-mid-term, there is no member of the Kim family positioned to take over as Supreme Leader. No single powerbroker would be able to easily consolidate power, and there is no clear contender for the position. The international media is enamored with the idea of Kim Yo-jong taking control from her brother. Yet, while she is no doubt a key gatekeeper and powerbroker in the regime, as a woman, she faces the challenge of winning legitimacy in one of the most patriarchy societies on the planet. Kim Pyong-il, brother to Kim Jong-il, is the most senior male in the family, but he lacks a powerbase from which to operate and could be easily sidelined.

A Non-Kim Leader Emerges

It is possible, though unlikely, that a new Supreme Leader may emerge from outside the Kim family. Pyongyang watchers often bring up Choe Ryong-hae because of his proximity to Kim Jong-un and his connections to key decision-making bodies. Ri Man-gon, with his ties to the Korea Workers' Party

and OGD could also be a contender. This category of leaders could also include other leaders, who once had authority but fell from grace under Kim Jong-un's political maneuvering or retired.

Any emergent leader from outside the Kim family faces the challenge of surmounting a system constructed to limit their power and inhibit their ability to build coalitions. The ill-fated Sixth Corps coup d'etat of 1996 fell victim to this system, and that incident only reinforced the Kims' desire to prevent it in the future. The Kim family has successfully undercut potential competitors to leadership, making anyone from outside the Kim family an unlikely contender. Moreover, any leader not of the Kim family will face the challenge of establishing legitimacy without the myth of the Paektu Bloodline. The Kim family has firmly established a cult of personality over the past seventy years, and that will be difficult to undo and replace.

Figurehead

In an interregnum, North Korean leadership could also determine that it is important to install a male Kim as "Supreme Leader," despite their shortcomings. The actions of such a leader would be driven by an individual or a group that has the political savvy, but lacks sufficient legitimacy to rule themselves. Several members of the Kim family make for feasible figurehead rulers. Kim Jong-un's older brother, Kim Jong-chol, was passed over by their father as "unfit to rule," but he would represent the continuation of the Paektu Bloodline. While it is rumored that Kim Jon-un has a son, who may be six- or ten-years-old, the boy is far too young to rule, opening the possibility of a regent system.

Collective Leadership

Of course, that same group of key stakeholders could determine that the fig leaf of legitimacy that a figurehead could provide is either insufficient or unnecessary. In this case, a group of representatives of the Kim family, and senior party, and the military may find a working arrangement for rule. This would likely be an evolution of the continuity of governance system established in the wake of the leader's incapacitation or death. Such a system is likely to be unstable, as each of the brokers would be tempted to build their own legitimacy and power as a fundamentally new political dynamic emerges in North Korea.

The Room Where It Happens

These scenarios allow us to explore the challenges inherent in the process of succession in North Korea, yet we can never underestimate the opacity of the country and its regime. Those of us on the outside must remain cautious in our interpretations of rumors and speculation that emerge from the hermit Kingdom. The North Korean regime is particularly careful about revealing information about the health of the Supreme Leader. In reality, only members of Kim's inner circle can claim to have clarity on these matters. Yet, unless Kim Jong-un is harboring a secret (and unlikely) plan for succession, even these individuals will be forced to act on incomplete information. The rest of us can only hope to have a framework to help us understand the various shards of information as they emerge.

Ken Gause is the Director of the Adversary Analytics Program (AAP), Chris Steinitz the Director of the North Korea Program in the AAP, and Elizabeth Yang a Research Specialist at CNA. The views expressed here are the authors' alone.

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