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# North Korean Leadership

## *Kim Jong Il's Intergenerational Balancing Act*

by Jei Guk Jeon

### Conclusions

- One key to the unexpected longevity of North Korea—the world's last unreformed Stalinist polity—lies in Kim Jong Il's adroit balancing act between the old and young elites since coming to power in 1994 following his father's death.
- Based on "inclusive politics" and an "honor-power sharing" arrangement, Kim Jong Il's balancing act has effectively reduced factional cleavages that might otherwise have crippled the hereditary succession plan.
- The "honor-power sharing" arrangement—which gives honors to the older elites and real power to younger elites—has secured the loyalty of both the old guard and younger hopefuls.
- As long as Kim Jong Il's balancing act works and internal solidarity remains firm, the new regime could survive for a prolonged period.
- If the balance breaks down, Pyongyang's power circle will slip into a centrifugal spiral, followed by power struggles among rival factions and the eventual collapse of the regime.

### The Transition of Power

The death of a totalitarian leader in the communist world, such as Stalin in the Soviet Union and Mao in China, can lead to a power struggle. North Korea's Kim Il Sung was a totalitarian ruler no less absolutist than any other socialist leader. Therefore, when Kim Il Sung died in July 1994 outside observers predicted an imminent power struggle. Surprisingly the demise of North Korea's "Great Leader," however, did not result in any particular changes in court politics. To all appearances, Pyongyang's power elite remained calm and stable, without any signs of factional infighting. Herein lies the mystery of contemporary North Korean politics.

## Is the Post-Kim Il Sung Power Circle Really Immune to Factional Cleavages?

Looking at the political landscape in 1994, the North Korean power circle was not totally immune to factional cleavages. Rather, upon closer examination, factional rumblings were underway behind the scenes, feeding on the uncertainties surrounding succession politics. For example, Kim's clan appeared far from monolithic—allegedly divided into several intra-clan factions. In addition to Kim Jong Il's faction, prominent others included his uncle Kim Young Ju's line, his step-mother Kim Song Ae's faction, his half-brother Kim Pyong Il's clique, and his father's comrades-in-arms. With the head of the family [Kim Il Sung] gone, the clan itself might have turned into a seedbed of power struggles.

Intra-military cleavages also seemed to exist. Allegedly there were three military factions: the old-generation hardliners; the younger-generation officers mainly composed of Kim Jong Il supporters; and a neutral faction indifferent to the old-young conflicts. Another potential source of intra-military discord was a rift between the Pyongyang garrison command and the field army.

A wider cleavage that developed in the power circle was the intergenerational split that had been forming along the two different leadership lines of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. As part of the father-to-son succession plan, Kim Il Sung had made every effort to create Kim Jong Il's own power base. Based on his father's strong support, Kim Jong Il prepared a solid power base in the ruling troika—the party, the state, and the army. Against this backdrop, however, North Korea's power structure became "dualistic," with two semi-independent hierarchies of authority and two self-sustaining chains of command—one leading to Kim Il Sung and another leading to Kim Jong Il. Whereas Kim Il Sung's power structure was firmly founded on the old-generation revolutionaries, Kim Jong Il's command line was built around the younger elite of the three-revolution squads, and the graduates of Mankyongdae Revolutionary Academy, Namsan School, and Kimil-sung University. The death of Kim Il Sung therefore signaled a dramatic shift of power toward the Kim Jong Il line. A radical power shift could have triggered repercussions from the old guards who had doubts about Kim Jong Il's leadership capacity.

Given the multiple sources of internal discontent, there was no guarantee that Kim Jong Il could automatically ascend to power. If any of the potential cleavages had flared up for any reason, the succession plan would have evaporated over night.

Against this background, Kim Jong Il employed a balancing strategy aimed at preventing potential ruptures and pulling all age groups into his own political orbit. For the old guards, he opted for "inclusive" politics. For the younger hopefuls, he created an "honor-power sharing" arrangement. In so doing, Kim Jong Il was prudent and cautious, at odds with his image in the outside world as an "impatient, reckless, irrational actor." His behaviors toward the power elite turned out to be carefully crafted tactics based on a relatively rational calculation of political costs and benefits.

### Care of the Old Guard: *Inclusive Politics*

After the death of Kim Il Sung, the successor-designate Kim Jong Il's strategic options with the old

guards were to exclude or include them. Given some unreliable elements in the ruling circle, the exclusionary option could have been the surest way to eliminate all the potential rivals and unreliable figures once and for all.

However, Kim Jong Il was not in a position to do away with the old guard. The aged revolutionaries, who had fought anti-Japanese guerrilla warfare together with Kim Il Sung, still dominated leadership posts in the ruling troika. During the transition period, therefore, assuring the loyalty of the old guards was of greater value than jettisoning them in concluding the succession plan. If Kim Jong Il had chosen to be antagonistic toward the elders, it could have been costly. Also, considering their ages, the days of these elders are numbered. Therefore, it was unnecessary to hurriedly remove them at the risk of political repercussions.

Based on these calculations, Kim Jong Il chose an "inclusionary" option toward the old guard. He managed to curb the political passions of the younger elite, who have so far devoted their total loyalty to him. He also controlled his own political ambition, refusing further honors for himself and thereby sending a message to younger hopefuls that loyalty to Kim Jong Il is the surest route to power in due time.

Having calmed the aspirations of the younger elite, Kim Jong Il declared that "to respect the revolutionary seniors is a noble moral obligation of all revolutionaries," and "the revolutionary achievements of old guards must be inherited and protected." Along this policy line, he retained all the elders employed by Kim Il Sung and kept intact the ruling machinery and policies devised by his father. Few old revolutionaries, therefore, were replaced before the first meeting of the Tenth Supreme People's Assembly, held in early September 1998, when a number of posts went to the younger elite. Nor has he conducted political purges to do away with the unreliable old guards.

Kim's strategic action toward the old guard proved prudent enough to ensure their loyalty. Even when an elder dies, Kim appoints a successor only after a dignified period of time. For example, when his father's defense minister Oh Jin-U died in spring 1995, Kim Jong Il left the minister's position vacant for more than seven months before naming a new minister, Choe Kwang. Likewise, although Choe died in February 1997, the post was left vacant until September 1998, when Kim Il Chul was appointed.

Kim strengthened the loyalty of the old guard by retaining old high-ranking officials in their posts even when some of their relatives defected to Seoul. For example, Prime Minister Kang Song-San stayed in the same post until recently although his son-in-law defected to Seoul in 1994. Taking into account that—in the past—families of defectors had been punished harshly, such extraordinary treatment could be enough to induce the elders' loyalty.

Thanks to his inclusive politics—retaining all the old revolutionaries in their incumbent posts—Kim has been able to inherit not only his father's leadership titles but also the sustained loyalty of the old guard.

### **Appeasing Younger Hopefuls: *Honor-Power Sharing***

Having retained the old elite and its policies, post-Kim Il Sung North Korea looks like a "land that time forgot," where nothing has ever changed. However, the indefinite continuation of such a phenomenon might have triggered discontent among the younger hopefuls, who had long been waiting for the Kim Jong Il era. Therefore, it was necessary for Kim to appease the young-elite to maintain their loyalty to him.

Once the loyalty of the old guards was assured, Kim quietly began realigning power arrangements to please both the old and young elite. He introduced an "honor-power sharing" practice. "Honors" are given to the elders while "real power" is given to the younger. Perhaps this ploy takes into account the value orientations varying across generations—the older tend to seek honors while the younger seek power. Many old revolutionaries thus merely remained in honorable, symbolic, prestigious posts, while the younger elite, mainly Kim's friends and close associates, have been placed in key posts with real power.

Also, during the three years of mourning Kim Il Sung's death (1994-97), about fifty power elite died, including deputy premier Kang Hi-Won and the two aforementioned defense ministers. Taking advantage of this opportunity, Kim Jong Il has quietly placed hand-picked junior elite to key posts in the party, state, and army.

Kim Jong Il has stabilized and substantially broadened his power base, encompassing all age groups, ranging from the elders (ages 60s, 70s and 80s) to the young hopefuls (ages 30s and 40s). A window has thus been opened for the peaceful transition of power from one generation to another.

### **Strategy Effectiveness**

Kim Jong Il's intergenerational balancing act turned out to be a "win-win" formula for himself as well as for all the old and young power elite. For Kim in particular, the balancing act bore rich fruits. First, he reincorporated all age groups into his own political circle, successfully suturing all the potential cleavages within the ruling group. Thus far no sign of power struggles has surfaced. And, the foundation of the Kim Jong Il regime has been firmly consolidated, based on the intergenerational harmony. Second, steered by Kim's balancing act, Pyongyang's power circle has been undergoing a quiet generational shift, without frictions between the old and young generations or substantial changes in the existing power structure.

However, upon closer examination, the seemingly adroit tactics have their own inherent limits and contradictions, which might undermine the foundation of the regime in the long run. Kim's inclusive politics laid an unexpected obstacle to internal reform and external opening, by keeping intact the conservative old-revolutionaries who prefer *status-quo* to substantial changes. As long as the old guard has leverage in politics, meaningful reform is unlikely to occur.

The "delicate" balance between old and young elites and/or truce between hawks and doves may not last indefinitely. Ironically, thanks to Kim's inclusive politics, some "unreliable" elements continue to

survive in the ruling circle. Herein lies the seed of potential cleavages and dissidence. As long as Kim's balancing act continues to work, the power elite will remain openly loyal to him. However, if the balancing act breaks down, the power elite is likely to fragment and may turn against Kim Jong Il.

For example, if the balancer disappears from the scene—perhaps due to an accident, illness, or for any other reason, the delicate balance he has devised may evaporate. Kim Jong Il's balancing could also be fractured by radical political changes caused by events such as a palace coup, food riots, or external pressures. Given some unreliable and/or alienated elites, the possibility of a palace coup cannot be ruled out. If a coup were to remove Kim Jong Il, the successor probably could not duplicate Kim's balancing act.

The ailing economy is a challenge to Kim's balancing act. Although the economic pain alone might not be automatically translated into political unrest, it could be a catalyst leading to internal disputes. However tightly controlled and thoroughly inured to Spartan hardship, the North Korean masses, if starved enough, may rise up in food riots. Food riots might initially be suppressed by military force, but this would invite intense criticism from the international community. Moreover, brutal suppression of starving masses might lead to some military units breaking with the regime, because the extended families of soldiers and lower-echelon officers could be affected by food shortages.

Even if such events do not happen, the ever-deepening economic ills could reduce the political leverage that is indispensable to Kim's balancing act. Thus far he has been able to manage political patronage at his own will, using a huge sum of political funds. However, if he could no longer provide sufficient favors for the power elite due to a depletion of economic resources, his political leverage and maneuverability would be reduced and his balancing act disturbed.

If the delicate balance breaks down, the power circle would turn into a downward spiral. Not only would all the latent cleavages come to the surface, but new factions might also arise. Pyongyang thus might turn into a political ground of factional rivalries along family lines, the inner-circle *vs.* outer-circle, the Party *vs.* the Army, field commands *vs.* border/security guards, political officers *vs.* regular army commanders, politico-security apparatus *vs.* socio-economic/diplomatic apparatus, hardliners *vs.* reformists, and so on. Intense power struggles could result in anarchy, followed by the collapse of the Stalinist regime and even the state.

<b>Personality Reconsidered</b>
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The persona of Kim Jong Il still remains an enigma. Above all, his reclusive behaviors continue to puzzle the outside world. He has rarely traveled outside the cocoon of the hermit kingdom. His public appearances are extremely rare. His public utterances are almost nil. Such behaviors give birth to numerous speculations over his personality. He is characterized, particularly by westerners, as "an unstable madman," "a black prince of terror," "a reckless and unpredictable leader," "a provocative actor," or "a closet reformer." Casting Kim Jong Il into such a stereotype, however, is misleading. He appears to be more clever, calculating and tactful than expected. In the light of his political actions, he is likely to master and/or enjoy dual tactics. His dualistic ploy may be seen in such practices as: (a) "controlled reform" to attract foreign investments while reiterating "our own-style socialism"; (b) the provision of exclusive favors for the People's Army while taming it with harsh sticks; (c) the rejection of official dialogues with Seoul while encouraging unofficial contacts with businessmen; and (d) a brinkmanship diplomacy toward Washington with a nuclear card in one hand and with a peace card in another. Although these tactics have not always produced benefits, it might be safe to say that Kim Jong Il is neither stupid nor crazy.

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