

## **The beginning of the end in North Korea?**

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Speculation about North Korean leader Kim Jong-il's health have begun to surface on a weekly basis: most recently it has reported that he has pancreatic cancer, and last year he was thought to have had a stroke. While none of these rumors have been substantiated, photographs of Kim Jong-il reveal that he has aged visibly over the past year. He has even stopped wearing lifts in his shoes to make himself look taller!

Kim Jong-il's health problems have caused outside observers to begin speculating about who may succeed him as leader of North Korea. Although there has been no formal announcement from the North, many suspect that Kim's third son: Kim Jong-eun – has been chosen as the next leader of North Korea. We know very little about Kim Jong-eun: he studied in Switzerland for a few years, can speak English and German, and is evidently his father's favorite.

Given the uncertainty surrounding who will follow Kim Jong-il, and North Korea's already precarious domestic and international situation, speculation has naturally followed about whether Kim Jong-eun can maintain power on his own, and what this might mean for the future of North Korea.

On the one hand, if North Korea can resolve the succession issue quickly, the regime might survive well into the future. A third generation of Kim leadership could mean a more belligerent North Korea that is less willing to negotiate with the outside, as the young dictator proves to his own military and regime that he is strong enough and capable enough to lead the country. This could mean a return to politics as depressingly seen before, with a recalcitrant North Korea yearning for respect and recognition from the outside world.

Yet the odds of a smooth succession may not be high. Kim Jong-il himself was announced as his father's successor fifteen years before he actually took office in 1994, and this allowed him time and legitimacy to build support among important internal constituencies, and also created an aura of inevitability that led North Koreans to accept him as the next ruler. Kim Jong-il also benefitted from the era in which he followed his father; this was before the famine of the late 1990s, only a few years after the end of Soviet support for North Korea, and at the beginning of the

long nuclear crisis that continues to plague North Korea's foreign relations with the world.

Kim Jong-eun will face a much more difficult situation than did his father. He will have almost no time to build an expectation of inevitability within North Korea, and he will have to manage and placate numerous competing factions, egos, and interests. Furthermore, his young age would make leadership difficult in any country – he has virtually no experience in political posts and has no proven leadership abilities, and respect for age and elders is particularly emphasized in Korea. Furthermore, the North Korean economy and foreign relations are worse than ever, and Kim will have few financial or material reserves with which to buy support or to respond to a sudden crisis. While this in and of itself does not mean he will fail, he certainly faces tremendous obstacles to a smooth succession.

What does this mean for the future of North Korea? For years there was little reason to think that the North might actually collapse. And while Kim Jong-eun may rule for the next twenty years, there is also the increasing possibility that he will be unable to manage the competing international pressures and internal factional demands. While the military and party may remain unified, if disagreement about policies or strategies become severe enough there could be a split into competing factions. This could lead to policy paralysis, or in an extreme instance, actual conflict within North Korea itself.

That is, we may be seeing the beginning of the internal collapse of the Kim dynasty, and governments, humanitarian organizations, and individuals around the region might begin reviewing their contingency plans for how to deal with the chaos that such a collapse would surely bring.