

Coached and confident, North Korea's Kim echoes grandfather
Reuters
April 16 , 2012

SEOUL, April 16 — Most North Koreans never heard their late leader, Kim Jong-il, speak. His son, smiling and joking with generals on a podium as he watched a big military parade yesterday, shattered that mould.

In a surprise 20-minute speech, Kim Jong-un, the 20-something leader of one of the world's most isolated countries, displayed few nerves as he praised his grandfather, Kim Il-sung, on the centenary of his birth.

Not only has the young Kim inherited his still-revered grandfather's throne in the world's only hereditary Stalinist dictatorship, he has his looks and, it seems, his voice.

"It is very obvious that he trained hard to sound like his grandfather and looked comfortable doing so," said Bae Myung-jin of Soongsil University in South Korea, who has studied the speech of the three generations of the North's leaders.

While Kim's address to ranks of thousands of soldiers sounded monotonous, Bae said the tone and pitch was carefully modulated to harken back to the impoverished state's founder, who died in 1994 and is still the country's "eternal president".

The portly and jowly young Kim sported the slicked-back high-sided haircut favoured by his grandfather and was flanked by top military men clad in unusual white uniforms, reminiscent of an outfit worn by Kim Il-sung at a victory parade after the signing of a truce ending the 1950-53 Korean War.

Establishing the young Kim's legitimacy through his bloodline and reminding people of happier times in North Korea, which was richer than the South for some of Kim Il-sung's rule, can help erase some of the more painful memories under Kim Jong-il, when millions died in a famine in the 1990s.

"Kim Jong-il had a shrieky and sharp, high-pitched voice," said Pak Sang-hak, a human rights activist in the South who regularly had to listen to the North's former leader as a member of the Socialist Youth League before defecting 12 years ago.

"Father was calmer and had more authority," Pak said of Kim Il-sung.

In another major surprise, Kim did not appear to have a strong North Korean accent, which many in the prosperous South find grating.

"I was struck by the fact that without much effort he could sound like someone from Seoul," said Peter Beck, an expert on Korean affairs at the Asia Foundation and a fluent Korean speaker.

That doesn't mean, however, that South Koreans have found a man they can do business with.

"Given that the context of the speech advocated sustaining the military-first policies and Kim pushed ahead with the rocket launch, I don't think people here will find him attractive," said Kim Jung-ho, 23, a third-year university student in Seoul.

Many observers believe that North Korea will follow its failed rocket launch last week with a third nuclear test. — Reuters

The Malaysian Insider

Copyright © 2012 The Malaysian Insider

Source: <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/world/article/coached-and-confident-north-koreas-kim-echoes-grandfather/>