

**Hunger Pains Test North Korea's Dynastic Succession**  
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**By Shim Jae Hoon**

*Stability in North Korea depends on averting famine and ending nuclear-weapons program*

An anxious world, watching for signs of instability after the death of Kim Jong Il, has been reassured for the time being. After 37 years of brutal rule marked by firing squads and concentration camps, a father's arrangements for transfer of power to his third son, Kim Jong Un, appear to be moving along smoothly.

But in the end, Kim's legitimacy and political survival depend on whether or not he can resolve the ever-present threat of hunger and achieve economic reforms that could obviate a regime collapse.

The line of responsibility is clear: In a fresh burst of personality cult, the young Kim – who turned 29 on January 8 – has assumed official titles of Great Successor, Wise General and Supreme Commander of the North Korean People's Army. As vice chairman of the Central Military Commission of the ruling Workers' Party, he already had virtual control over the 1.2-million-strong standing army.

The powerful posts seemingly rule out any near-term challenges to young Kim's ascension, though few analysts in Seoul expect the unusual third-generation dynastic succession to succeed. The hunger challenge facing the failed, isolated nation of 24 million is too formidable to ignore. The regime has managed to develop a small nuclear arsenal at the expense of feeding its people – a nuclear-first policy that led to some 2 million people dying from hunger during the 1990s.

Thus the rise of Kim Jong Un is overshadowed by the long-running scourge of food shortage, as the country prepares to commemorate the February 16 birthday of his father, a national holiday, and the April 15 centennial birthday anniversary of his grandfather Kim Il Sung, the state founder who died in 1994. In the opinion of many North Korea watchers, it would be unwise for young Kim to launch his mandate without provision of special holiday rations.

Specialists suggest that North faces a 700,000-ton grain shortage, leaving the government unable to feed a third of its populace. After depending on China's handouts for many years, Kim's new team is evidently turning to the US, with North Korean diplomats in New York discreetly asking US officials for food in the midst of the official mourning period. They asked for 320,000 metric tons of grains in a proposed deal: North Korea could suspend its clandestine uranium-enrichment program for food. Washington appears noncommittal, reportedly offering an unspecified shipment of "nutrients," not grains, which it fears may go to feeding the North Korean army.

With the US and South Korea facing presidential elections this year, officials in the two capitals are not averse to such a deal. The key question, as ever, is whether the North can be trusted. For the moment, neither side is convinced Pyongyang is ready. North Korea has broken plenty of promises: It walked out of six-party denuclearization talks in Beijing in 2008, after taking shipments of heavy oil and rice. In an official commentary marking the death of Kim Jong Il, party newspaper *Rodong Sinmun* cited nuclear arms and missiles as

paramount legacies of Kim Jong Il's rule, implying those are not tradable goods.

Analysts mull how long can Kim Jong Un last in power without tackling economic reform. If the collapse of the Soviet Union produced any lesson, it was that nuclear weapons can't satisfy hungry stomachs. In the last three decades of feverish military expansion under Kim Jong Il, the North devoted nearly a half of its annual national resources for developing weapons of mass destruction. The misbegotten priority has brought catastrophe to the North, leading to the horrific 1990s famine.

How Kim Jong Un chooses to deal with this crucial problem of economic reform could potentially turn into a flashpoint in relations with the military establishment. He must walk a tightrope between feeding people and paying fealty to *son 'gun*, the military-first policy of his father.

His lack of governing experience could hamper efforts at developing an independent base of power, analysts suggest. By comparison, Kim Jong Il boasted a 20-year track-record running the party and secret police, purging skeptics along the way, before formally taking over the power structure at age 52. The apprenticeship under the watchful eye of his Stalinist father allowed him to impose a top-down autocracy after the death of Kim Il Sung. By contrast, Jong Un has had two years of on-the-job training.

In the absence of an omnipotent leader, North Korea will most likely shift to collective leadership rule. This shift is indicated by the seven top party and army figures who carried Kim's coffin at the cortege. Behind Kim Jong Un walked his uncle and party security chief Jang Song Thaek, 65, widely reported to be informal regent. Jang is married to Jong Il's sister. Others following included Kim Ki Nam, 82, the party's chief propaganda officer; Vice Marshal Ri Yong Ho, 69, chief of general staff; and defense minister General Kim Yong Chun, 75.

Invisible from the crowd but listed in the funeral roster were four other powerful army generals, charged with warding against challengers to the established order.

All power elites handpicked by Kim Jong Il to protect and assist Jong Un, they represent an elaborate system of overlapping spies and counterspies. Of these powerbrokers, only Jang stands out as a *primus inter pares*. A longtime party figure, he is said to admire China's economic-reform policy, but will he risk speaking out in favor of opening and reform?

Few analysts expect the collective leadership system to work in the absolutist culture of North Korea. "Any person with normal sense will find it hard to accept a third-generation power transfer," is the surprisingly candid comment from Kim Jong Nam, 41, Jong Il's first son who lives in Macau. Shortly after the state funeral, he emailed a contact at Japan's newspaper *Tokyo Shimbun*: "My father had 37 years of absolute power, and I just don't know how someone with two years of training can expect to fill his shoes." Jong Nam wasn't invited to attend his father's funeral.

Regime stability and continuity were overarching themes in the joint editorial of the party and army newspapers published on January 1 outlining major policy goals. While vowing to continue the military-first policy, the editorial repeated calls for easing food shortages and providing daily necessities. It also lashed out at the South Korean government as "anti-national, traitorous gang" for failing to send an official condolence delegation to Kim's

funeral.

Talks of reconciliation with the South have vanished, indicating that the new leader is preoccupied with consolidating his internal power for the time being.

This inward-looking policy is expected to continue until the new leader feels confident about tackling the knottiest issues. Meanwhile, Washington is waiting to see how the North pursues talks over food aid, while Seoul says it stands ready to strike a “grand bargain deal,” offering large-scale aid if the North abandons nuclear weapons.

Similarly, China is cautious, indicating it’s watchful against Pyongyang’s provocative behavior. President Hu Jintao told visiting South Korean President Lee Myong Bak on January 8 that Beijing is committed to keeping the peninsula “stable and peaceful.”

In the end, peace and stability will depend on the state of North Korea’s granaries and the military’s willingness to accept a grand bargain.

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