

Reshuffle of North Korea's Military Gains Momentum

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(SEOUL, South Korea) — North Korea is reshuffling its most powerful institution, the military, with the dismissal of its army chief — a key mentor to young ruler Kim Jong Un — and the promotion of a general little known outside Pyongyang to a central role over the million-man force.

Illness was the reason cited for army chief Ri Yong Ho's departure, but to some outside analysts it bore the hallmarks of a purge by Kim as he tries to leave his mark on the regime he inherited seven months ago. The promotion announced Tuesday of Hyon Yong Chol — the fourth vice marshal North Korea has named since the death of Kim's father, Kim Jong Il — could further that goal.

The changes have important but as yet unclear implications for North Korea's relationship with the rest of the world. The authoritarian nation maintains one of the world's largest armies, clings to its nuclear weapons program despite broad condemnation and sanctions, and regularly flings warlike rhetoric at rival South Korea.

News of Hyon's promotion in the Korean People's Army follows the announcement Monday that Ri, a vice marshal who had been chief of the General Staff of the army since 2009, was dismissed from his high-ranking posts in the military and the Workers' Party "due to illness," according to state media. No details were provided about who might succeed Ri as army chief.

Ri had been at Kim Jong Un's side throughout his transition to leadership and after his father's death, and appeared healthy in a public appearance just days ago. Analysts were skeptical about the official explanation for his abrupt departure.

"There's a very high probability that it wasn't health issues, but that he was purged," said Daniel Pinkston, a North Korea analyst at the International Crisis Group.

He noted that Ri, 69, won his major promotions at a September 2010 party conference but received none in April, stirring speculation about his future. Even if Ri never directly defied the new leader, his departure would send a strong warning to anyone seeking to challenge Kim Jong Un, Pinkston said.

Ri's departure comes as Kim Jong Un is making his mark as North Korea's new leader in other ways. Last weekend, state TV showed him at a watching a concert and visiting a kindergarten in the company of a mysterious woman who carried herself much like a first lady. Her identity has not been revealed, but making her presence public was a notable change from Kim Jong Il's era, when his companions were kept out of official media.

The dismissal of the top army official is a significant move in North Korea. Kim Jong Il elevated the army's role when he became leader after the 1994 death of father Kim Il Sung, the nation's founder.

Kim Jong Un has upheld his father's "songun" military-first policy, but in April he also began promoting younger officials to key military and party posts.

North Korea's political and military reshuffles are mysterious, with officials sometimes dropping out of sight without explanation or their departures blamed on illness.

The robust and stocky Ri showed no sign of illness when he spoke in late April at a meeting of top officials marking the 80th anniversary of the army's founding. He was shown in photos on July 6 chatting with Pyongyang residents and two days later joined Kim Jong Un at the Kumsusan mausoleum to pay respects to Kim Il Sung.

"Whether because of a physical malady or political sin, Ri Yong Ho is out, and Pyongyang is letting the world know to not expect to hear about him anymore," said John Delury, an assistant professor at Yonsei University's Graduate School of International Studies in South Korea.

Ri's departure could mean he lost a power struggle with rising star Choe Ryong Hae, the military's top political officer tasked with supervising the army, said Koh Yu-hwan, a professor at Seoul's Dongguk University.

Choe was promoted to several top posts and was one of three named vice marshal in April. Ri had been anointed as Kim's patron during the young man's rise to power, Koh said. "But after Kim formally took power, Choe has emerged as No. 2."

"Perhaps (Ri) was always meant to be a transitional regent figure, and his function is played," Delury said.

Little is known about Hyon, the career officer newly named a vice marshal. According to the Unification Ministry-affiliated Information Center on North Korea in Seoul, Hyon was named a member of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party in September 2010. In one sign of his rise, he served on the funeral committee for Kim Jong Il in December.

Where Ri's departure and the apparent rise of younger generals leaves North Korea's army remained unanswered.

The reshuffle comes amid North Korean threats in recent months to attack South Korea's president and Seoul's conservative media, angry over perceived insults to its leadership and U.S.-South Korean military drills that Pyongyang says are a prelude to an invasion. A North Korean artillery attack in 2010 killed four South Koreans.

The Korean Peninsula has remained locked in a state of war and divided since a truce in 1953 ended three years of fighting.

The United States said Monday that without fundamental change in policy direction, personnel changes in North Korea's military leadership would mean little.

State Department spokesman Patrick Ventrell said North Korea should "take the path available to it" and rejoin the international community by refraining from threats and complying with its international obligations including denuclearization. He urged the North to feed and educate its people rather than pour "scarce resources into nuclear, missile and other military programs."

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