

Policy Forum 04-49B: The New Image of Kim Jong-il: The First Step towards a New Leadership Model

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The New Image of Kim Jong-il: The First Step towards a New Leadership Model

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By Ruediger Frank

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I. Introduction

Ruediger Frank, Professor of East Asian Political Economy at the University of Vienna, writes: "by reducing his own role for the ideological stability of the system, Kim Jong-il might be resolving one of the most pressing issues in North Korean domestic politics: his succession."

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II. Essay by Ruediger Frank

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There are reports that the North Korean leader Kim Jong-il is concerned over the glorification of his person and has ordered the removal of some of his pictures from public places, as well as the use of less euphoric titles related to him in the mass media. (see NAPSNET, [17 November, 2004](#) and [18 November, 2004](#))

This coincides with my own cautious observations in September 2004, when I visited P'yongyang and found no picture of any leader in my hotel room, as well as only Kim Il-sung's portrait in a conference room where just a few months before images of both father and son could be seen. An estimated 50% of all slogans in the capital read "The Great Leader Kim Il-sung will always be with us", hinting at a strong emphasis on the deceased founder of the DPRK - at the expense of his successor, as one might argue.

If these observations are the expression of a general trend, and if Kim Jong-il himself has ordered the related measures, how shall we interpret this?

The first thought, certainly supported by wishful thinking, would be to expect a leadership crisis. South Korean sources were very quick to rule this out, and indeed, a leadership crisis does not seem to be the most convincing interpretation. So if nobody has forced Kim Jong-il to downscale the level of official admiration for his person, if this rather was his own decision, what could be the reason behind?

A probably more realistic option originates from my attitude as optimist concerning North Korea's reform process (or adaptation, to use the official expression). As such, I suggest looking into the future of a changing North Korea. In earlier posts, I have insisted that the economic reforms are for real and that ideology is being changed as well (see https://nautilus.org/fora/security/0331_Frank.html and https://nautilus.org/DPRKBriefingBook/transition/Ruediger_Socialism.html). So what happens if the current policy is successful, if private economic activities blossom, economic cooperation with South Korea and Japan develops, the conflict with the U.S. is resolved peacefully, the standard of living rises and orthodox socialism is replaced by dynamic nationalism as the predominant ideology? The sense of individuality will increase. Military tension will be reduced. The readiness to risk life and (growing) private property will reach alarmingly low levels, while the wish for political participation will become stronger. Problems such as corruption will aggravate and provoke a public reaction. The leadership will have to bear the consequences, which includes the option of resignation. A single leader, which is a characteristic of the old system, fits neither with the new vision of a reformed socialism, nor with its reality. If the single leader resigns, the system collapses. If he doesn't, social

unrest will be the result.

To make matters worse, economic success means an end to the information monopoly of the state. To reduce the contrast between propaganda and reality, which will inevitably become visible to the population in the process of change in North Korea, the propaganda needs to be adapted, too. Learning from the experience of transformation societies, the DPRK has shown exceptional foresight before when it carefully prepared the economic reforms of 2002 by a makeover of the ideology. The economic reforms seem to be successful, and the society is still stable. Now the DPRK continues on this path.

This consequentially leads to my assumption that, by reducing his own role for the ideological stability of the system, Kim Jong-il might be resolving one of the most pressing issues in North Korean domestic politics: his succession. The history of old Korea (and other monarchies) teaches that fights over succession can be not only bloody, but also highly destabilizing for the whole society. The DPRK can not afford such a fight under the current tense external situation. Kim Jong-il is over 60 years old and will pass away some day; it is crucial for the DPRK leadership to make sure that this moment will not mark the beginning of a factional strife that will eventually lead to collapse. By reducing his own role, Kim Jong-il reduces the role of his children, and in fact, makes it questionable that any single successor will be needed at all. We might be witnessing the first step out of many, which will eventually lead to the establishment of some kind of collective leadership in the DPRK, in the name of Kim Il-sung, under the new old ideology of chuch'e (read: nationalism) and sanctioned by Kim Jong-il. Only he is beyond any doubt concerning loyalty to the nation's founder, only he can establish a new system of leadership while maintaining stability and continuity in the political leadership of North Korea.

In order to ensure a maximum level of sustainability, only Kim Jong-il can establish such a new leadership model, and this might be exactly what he is doing.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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Nautilus Institute

608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:

nautilus@nautilus.org