

Policy Forum 08-072A: The Future of Political Leadership in North Korea

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The Future of Political Leadership in North Korea

By Rudiger Frank

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I. Introduction

Rudiger Frank, Professor of East Asian Political Economy at the University of Vienna, writes, "There is always the possibility that a power-hungry family clan of one of Kim Jong-il's wives, or of another line in the family, or an ambitious leader from the military will try to grab power without considering the long-term consequences for political stability in North Korea... However, collective leadership is the most likely, the most logical option for North Korea's political future, simply because dynastic succession will not work."

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II. Article by Rudiger Frank

- "The Future of Political Leadership in North Korea"

By Rudiger Frank

On September 9th, Kim Jong-il's absence from the military parade has reminded the world that not even he can live forever, at least physically. The reason why his health is of such great concern to people despite their distaste for his policies is the fear of the possible consequences of his sudden death. The stability of the North Korean system guarantees that nuclear weapons remain more or less under control, that the already very difficult food situation does not turn into an even bigger humanitarian disaster, and that no strong neighbor intervenes and sets off a new international crisis. Stability in North Korea gives Seoul time to think about how to proceed with unification including all the unresolved issues such as property rights, treatment of the elite, and covering the costs of fast, large-scale economic rehabilitation and a sudden strain on social security networks. In 2004, after a visit to Pyongyang where I noticed the removal of Kim Jong-il's pictures in public places I wrote a short article on the possibility of collective leadership in North Korea but found little support (http://www.nautilus.org/fora/security/0449B_Frank.html). At that time, predictions were usually focusing on either one of the three sons, or on Chang Song-taek. The trend in public opinion seems to have changed now, after Kim Jong-il reportedly suffers from severe illness and still no successor has been named. However, we rarely find any analytical explanation of why such a collective leadership is the most likely option. So let me repeat some of the arguments I have developed and presented over the last few years.

How likely is succession of Kim Jong-il along the lines of 1994, i.e., by one of his sons or another single strong man? Those who have invested many years instead of a few days to gain some understanding of the logic of North Korea's political system would not brush aside such a scenario too easily. The main reason is the central function of the leader, which is essential and basic to the North Korean ideology. In a way following Russia's Bucharin, who in 1921 argued that the working class needs guidance by the Party, and the Party needs guidance by a Great Helmsman, the leader in North Korea is described as the brain or the head of the socio-economic body. It is evident that without a head, this body cannot live or operate with a clear target. However, the 1998 constitutional revision has shown that the North Koreans have found a way to square that circle. Kim Il-sung is physically dead, but still politically alive as the eternal president. So this problem is solved.

Every political rule needs legitimacy. In democracies, legitimacy is granted by elections. In autocracies, it either comes from great achievements or it is being delegated. Kim Il-sung claimed victory over the Japanese and the Americans, which is accepted as axiomatic in North Korea. Decades of his rule and continuous education combined with what has unanimously been described as a highly charismatic personality made sure that he achieved the status of a deity. This enabled him to pass on legitimacy to the next generation, to his eldest son Kim Jong-il, who has officially been announced successor during the so far last 6th congress of the Korean Worker's Party in 1980. If we compare the North Korean political system of that time with our solar system, then Kim Il-sung was the sun - which coincides with the name he has chosen for himself and the description of his person as the "sun of mankind" in North Korean propaganda. Kim Jong-il, on the other hand, was more like a moon, shining brightly but only because it reflected the sun. Turn off the sun, and the moon will get dark. It is evident that a moon will find it hard to make another large rock shine brightly enough to be accepted as the new leader. If Kim Jong-il ever wanted to install one his children as the next leader of North Korea, he should have tried to bring himself in a position to

bestow such legitimacy upon others. But has he done so? Has Kim Jong-il turned into a sun himself after 1994?

The answer is clearly no. In fact, the absence of any attempt into that direction, to become the new source of authority and legitimacy, is striking. There is no single Kim Jong-il statue, no Kim Jong-il square, no Kim Jong-il street, no Kim Jong-il face on a banknote, not even a Kim Jong-il pin. The latter have been reportedly spotted occasionally, but have been replaced quickly by the old one. In 2004, he even tried to take down his pictures in public places, a move that obviously went too far and has been reversed. Nevertheless, today about half of all slogans and posters in North Korea read "The Great Leader Kim Il-sung will always be with us".

Kim Jong-il understands perfectly that he can only rule as his father's son, and that any attempt to replace Kim Il-sung as the central symbolic figure will undermine his own legitimacy - like cutting off the branch of a tree while sitting on it. The dilemma is that unless Kim Jong-il replaces Kim Il-sung, he will not be able to delegate legitimacy as his father did. Hence we have not yet seen any official announcement of a successor from among his three sons. This has serious consequences for them: in terms of political legitimacy, they are less the sons of the current, but rather the grandsons of the former leader. They might be too far away from the sun to shine brightly enough.

The North Korean ideology, a combination of socialist and nationalist ideas, has often been compared to a religion. A glance at official propaganda reveals reports about supernatural abilities of the leaders and natural phenomena that remind of miracles, including the star that was shining over Jong-il Peak in Paektusan that night in February 1942 when the boy was allegedly born. Even apparently profane places of the leader's appearances such as elevators or escalators are preserved with spiritual enthusiasm. Who has ever visited North Korea must have stumbled over the red plates with golden script that commemorate the presence and activities of the leaders, stones in the mountains that are surrounded by fences because the leader once had a rest there etc. So if we accept the comparison with a religion, we find another argument why it is unlikely that Kim Jong-il will be succeeded by one of his sons, or actually, by one of Kim Il-sung's grandsons. The most successful monotheistic religions in the world know god and his son, or his prophet. There have been attempts elsewhere to continuously add water to the wine, but these religions have all vanished. The ones that survived and are strong today only know one step of succession. Much has been written about Kim Il-sung's relationship with Protestantism; parallels have been found in the official North Korean mythology. While it is hard to say whether he directly applied the logic of Christianity to his own ideological system, he certainly knew and understood it.

At this point, it seems that succession by a grandson of Kim Il-sung or any other single leader is very unlikely, at least if everything proceeds according to plan. And a plan must be there, since it would be hard to imagine that Kim Il-sung passed on rule to his son and did not consider what would happen afterwards. Kim Jong-il himself is said to be a man of intellectual capability, so he, too, must have been wrecking his brain about what to do next. So what could be the grand solution, if a single leader is needed but a new one cannot be appointed?

As mentioned above, the 1998 constitution points the way. In order to accommodate the various interests in government, party and military, in the provinces and cities, a collective called, for example, "Unification Council" could be appointed to rule the country. This would be done under the wise guidance of Kim Il-sung, the Eternal President, and Kim Jong-il, the Eternal General. Nobody should be afraid that such a collective would ever run out of advice; Christians and Moslems have done quite well for centuries with just a single book each. Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il have produced the decimal multiple of the Bible or the Koran. In order for such a committee to be legitimate, a major event such as the long outstanding 7th Party Congress could be called in. Either Kim Jong-il himself would announce the new leadership model, or if it was too late, this would be done on his

behalf by the new Top Administrator, probably by reading a letter. This administrator will be an established member of the elite, and like the Pope, he will lead as primus inter pares. But he will not become the third Great Leader.

The problem with plans is that sometimes, they work, but sometimes they don't. There is always the possibility that a power-hungry family clan of one of Kim Jong-il's wives, or of another line in the family, or an ambitious leader from the military will try to grab power without considering the long-term consequences for political stability in North Korea. This is the fuzzy part of reality that escapes our predictions. However, collective leadership is the most likely, the most logical option for North Korea's political future, simply because dynastic succession will not work.

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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