QUESTIONS ABOUT Kim Jong-il’s health have sparked fevered speculation over the future leadership of North Korea. Given the dynastic nature of the state, the obvious spotlight has been on Kim’s progeny. But as far as we know, none of Kim’s three sons has been properly groomed for the role. As such, uncertainty reigns.

Or does it? Recent rumors and media reports now suggest that Kim’s third son, Kim Jong-un, has been designated the heir apparent. The notion that leadership could be handed to Kim’s youngest and most inexperienced son has prompted some to guess that the end of the Kim-family era may be on the horizon, with some kind of change on the way. It has been suggested that a Kim Jong-un regime would have little ability to either forestall a power struggle among current senior leaders for the top spot or prevent efforts to empower a collective leadership of some kind to guide the post-Kim era.

While these ideas fit the conventional wisdom and are consistent with typical transitions in other authoritarian states guided by a cult of personality, North Korea is anything but a typical country, even by the standards of post-Mao China or the post-Stalin Soviet Union. Given the unique circumstances of North Korean history, a Kim Jong-un regime, with or without a prolonged apprenticeship under his father, may not quite be the precursor to change that some have anticipated.

What makes North Korea both unconventional and confusing is that its political system is neither true dynastic despotism nor purely socialist, where the value of universal equality is followed. The reality is that if it were a real dynasty, Kim Jong-il’s oldest son, Kim Jong-nam, would be the natural choice to succeed him. The fact that the youngest son has apparently been chosen reinforces the belief that the system is not, strictly speaking, dynastic. At the same time, the
This photograph of Kim Jong-il, Chairman of the National Defense Commission of North Korea, was taken at an unspecified function on June 9, 2007.
Yonhap News Agency

Delegations to the first meeting of the 12th Supreme People’s Assembly applaud at the appearance of Kim Jong-il, Chairman of the National Defense Commission, at the Mansudae Assembly Hall in Pyongyang on April 9, 2009.
Yonhap News Agency
Kim name has attained a mythical and theocratic value in North Korea. Yet, this mythical stature has consistently been based — at least officially — on the leader’s exceptional qualifications to govern rather than his filial status. As the process of Kim Jong-il’s succession demonstrated, the transition of power from Kim Il-sung to his son was remarkably gradual and deliberate and the successor’s legitimacy was cemented by his presumed ability, experience, and knowledge rather than solely through his blood line. The late Kim had always praised his son for his brilliance, wisdom, and exceptional leadership skills, and prepared him to run the country based on these qualities. Thus, the filial tie alone does not fully bestow legitimacy on any of Kim Jong-il’s sons, but it does establish an institutionalized basis for revered leadership.

Some may contend that Kim Jong-il never intended another “hereditary” succession at all; he certainly has not taken the same deliberate steps that his father did for him. But in the wake of his well-publicized health problems, and the growing uncertainty about succession, the leadership of the current Songun (“military first”) political system may view Kim Jong-un as the best chance for a stable and smooth transition. As mentioned above, without the benefit of a true monarchical dynasty, any new leader needs to have a degree of cultic attributes built around him. The elder two sons simply may not be suitable candidates. One is widely regarded as a spoiled world traveler, while the other is quietly ridiculed as an effeminate character inappropriate for macho Songun politics. Neither would seem worthy of being the next Great Leader. On the other hand, Kim Jong-un, despite his relative inexperience, at least is said to possess masculine character traits and an unblemished personal history upon which a cult of personality and charisma could be built.

Indeed, Kim Jong-un’s road to the top may not be as turbulent as many foreign observers predict. This is because, although North Korea does not have a traditional royal family, the system has created a virtual monarchy. Any visitor to the birthplace of the Great Leader, or the National History Museum, will be struck by the fact that the entire Kim Il-sung family dating back generations is enshrined and glorified in such a manner that it would make any other royal family blush by comparison. One might even conclude that North Korea has created a “royal” cult to the point that the Kim family has acquired an unparalleled right to be viewed as unique.

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In this context, Kim Jong-un, as part of the “Kim Dynasty,” benefits from that mystical association. It should also be noted that many political cultures, especially in Asia, have produced extraordinary families that trade on their mythic reputations among their followers, although rarely to the extent of the Kims. The Gandhis in India, the Bhuttos in Pakistan, and the Bandaranaike-Kumaratungas in Sri Lanka are all examples of this kind of political family. The Philippines and Indonesia also have similar families that use their names as the basis of legitimacy and power.

For the last several decades, the Juche ideology has created a system where any future leader cannot escape the legacy of the Great Leader and the Dear Leader. The will and guidance of the Great Leader Kim Il-sung remains alive in the political culture and affects decision making at all levels of the system. The Great Leader has been made immortal, with his birth marking the beginning of a new calendar starting with the year Juche 1. By so doing, he becomes a Christ-like figure for North Korea. His thoughts have been documented in over 100 books, each seemingly inspired by...
While speculation abounds that the post-Kim Jong-il era may mark the beginning of a bloody power struggle among ambitious generals, this scenario is highly unlikely. The military, steeped in the Kim-family scriptures, is collectively and indelibly loyal to their ‘eternal’ leadership. Kim’s divine spirit. Although fewer in number, Kim Jong-il’s teachings have also been used as an important source of policy directives. All indications are that the current system will remain a theocracy in which the Kim family, as the source of all political legitimacy, will remain eternal.2

Thus the Kim’s throne is not only a symbolic reservoir of authority, as in Japan or Thailand, but also a source of concrete policy guidance. In this sense, the Kim family is both symbolic and pragmatic. Should Kim Jong-un or one of his brothers eventually be elevated to rule, it should not come as a surprise. Yet, as was the case with Kim Jong-il’s succession, the new leader’s qualifications will still be of paramount importance. If the same standard is applied to Kim Jong-un as was applied to his father, he is certain to fail the test. However, this might not be necessary. The fact that there already exists an extremely rich body of family guidance and directives — scriptures, in essence — may mean that the next North Korean leader may not be required to have the same knowledge and ability as his predecessors. He could be more of a custodian of the divine, with his ideas and policies dictated by the legacy of his father and grandfather rather than controlled by a military clique or other contenders for power.

Furthermore, Songun as a social ideology could reinforce the legitimacy of Kim Jong-un. This military first theory is predicated on collectivism. While speculation abounds that the post-Kim Jong-il era may mark the beginning of a bloody power struggle among ambitious generals, this scenario is highly unlikely. The military, steeped in the Kim-family scriptures, is collectively and indelibly loyal to their “eternal” leadership. The norms and beliefs that are deeply entrenched in Songun are all about absolute unity and loyalty to the Great and Dear Leaders.

If there is to be any power struggle within the military, it will be in the form of competitive loyalty to the Kim leadership. In military barracks throughout the country, one will not fail to see slogans such as “We Will Defend the Leader to the End!” Any subversive activity or behavior against the Leader is unlikely to gain a sympathetic hearing within the military. Any conspiratorial scheme is unlikely either to go undetected or escape severe sanction. The demographics of the country show that virtually every family has active-duty soldiers, and most of the able bodies in the entire population are in the People’s Militia. This suggests that there is little room even for a purely “civilian” segment in society. Thus, not only does the Songun ideology eliminate the possibility of civil-military conflict, it also contributes to the prevention and suppression of mass uprising. The idea of grassroots dissent is virtually inconceivable.

Finally, the presence of perceived external threats, especially the confrontational nature of President Lee Myung-bak’s government in South Korea, will help ensure a smooth transition of power in the North. It is a dictum in politics that

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2 For a substantial discussion of the theocratic nature of North Korea, see Han S. Park, The Politics of Unconventional Wisdom (Lynne Reiner, Books, 2002), especially Chapter 6.
any external threat, actual or perceived, helps the leadership of a country to solidify power and generate support. The fact that the administration of US President Barack Obama has so far not changed the orientation of US policy toward North Korea, as many had widely expected, ironically helps the hardliners and militarists in North Korea.

My analysis suggests the following: While another “hereditary” power succession is likely, the leadership will be different in its nature and function from that of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il. It will be largely symbolic and not responsible for guiding day-to-day policies. But even if Kim Jong-un assumes leadership relatively soon, things will be far more stable than the conventional wisdom may suggest, due to the “politics of legacy” (yuhoon jungchi) and the doctrine of Songun. In the peculiar context of the political and social structure stemming from Songun, political unrest is highly unlikely. The presence of heightened external threats will also further strengthen the militarist sector.

The fact that Pyongyang might have settled on Kim Jong-un is hardly an alien experience within the context of Korean history, where a dynastic system was once the rule. One can even make the argument that the Yi Dynasty (1392 to 1910) in Korea has been taken over by the “Kim Dynasty” in North Korea following the interlude of Japanese colonial rule from 1910 to 1945. While this conclusion may be a bit of a stretch, current developments surrounding succession in the opaque world of North Korea make the comparison at the very least intriguing.

Han S. Park is University Professor of Public and International Affairs and Director of the Center for the Study of Global Issues at the University of Georgia