The Anatomy of Kim Jong Un’s Power
By Seong-chang Cheong

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Two years have passed since Kim Jong Un assumed power in North Korea following the death of his father, Kim Jong il. The younger Kim adopted and implemented major policies through the collective policy-making organizations of the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK)—such as the Political Bureau of the WPK Central Committee, the Plenary Meeting of the WPK Central Committee and the WPK Central Military Commission—that were almost never convened during his father’s rule. He has also placed an emphasis on close contact with the public, and despite displaying a belligerent attitude toward the United States and South Korea, he has also shown a strong desire for economic reforms and economic opening, thus further differentiating his leadership from that of his father.

After the death of North Korea’s founding leader Kim il sung in 1994, Kim Jong Il declared, “Do not expect change from me.” In contrast, Kim Jong Un has emphasized change rather than continuity.

Misreading Kim Jong Un
Kim Jong Un was able to demonstrate independent leadership immediately following the death of his father, because he was trained to be the successor for longer than most people knew, and had gained firm control of the core organizations such as the WPK, the Korean People’s Army (KPA) and public security organs. The rest of the world, however, did not know much about the succession process. This is largely due to the fact that North Korea’s succession plans were kept hidden. As a result, most experts initially questioned Kim Jong Un’s ability to rule North Korea in a stable manner, arguing that “he is still young and inexperienced.” Some American analysts even predicted that North Korea would be ruled as a “Jang Song Thaek military regency,” a reference to Kim Jong Un’s uncle, who was unexpectedly purged and executed in December 2013.

However, two weeks after the death of Kim Jong Il on Dec. 17, 2011, Kim Jong Un was appointed Supreme Commander of the KPA and officially began to lay the foundations of his leadership, starting with the military. Furthermore, less than four months after his father’s death, he amended the WPK regulations and the Constitution and was appointed to the party’s new highest positions, First Secretary of the WPK and First Chairman of the National Defense Commission, thus finalizing his official power succession. Kim Jong Il took four years to complete his official succession, Kim Jong Un achieved his in only four months. In July 2012, he assumed the additional title, Marshal of the Republic, and is now usually called that in North Korea.

Why this dynastic power succession succeeded in such a short time can be explained by the following: a firm command of the military and public security organs (the reign of terror); the fact that Kim Jong Il had explicitly designated Kim Jong Un as his successor; North Korea’s ideology that justifies monarchic succession of power; Kim Jong Un’s strong desire for power and leadership; support from family members such as Kim Kyong Hui, a daughter of Kim il sung, and Ri Yong Ho, one of the most influential figures in the military, from all of his duties. It also established the state Physical culture and sports organization, which is the result of thorough government control of information.
2013, where a new strategic policy was adopted to simultaneously pursue economic development and nuclear weapons capability. Significantly, the new policy line adopted by North Korea under Kim Jong Un is similar to the line of simultaneously developing the economy and national defense adopted at the 5th Plenary Meeting of the 4th Central Committee of the WPK in 1962, under Kim Jong Un’s grandfather, Kim Il Sung.

Furthermore, Kim Jong Un has made it his practice to publicly announce such meetings, as he did with meetings of the WPK Central Military Commission, which were never disclosed under Kim Jong II. In the case of enlarged meetings of the WPK Central Military Commission on Feb. 2 and Aug. 25, 2013, they were not only announced, but photos of the gatherings were made public. Just as the Chinese communist leaders decide major military policies through the Party’s Central Military Commission, Kim Jong Un signaled to the public that North Korea also decides major military policies through meetings of the WPK Central Military Commission.

It has also been reported that Kim Jong Un decides policies by organizing “consultative meetings” that are joined by senior officials of institutions related to the agenda under discussion, just as Kim Il Sung did in the past. So far, the only consultative meeting overseen by Kim Jong Un that has been revealed publicly was the Consultative Meeting of Officials in Fields of State Security and Foreign Affairs that was convened on Jan. 26, 2013. However, according to North Korean sources, Kim Jong Un discusses and makes decisions on domestic policies, focused mainly on the economy, at the weekly Tuesday Consultative Meeting, while security and foreign policies are dealt with at the weekly Friday Consultative Meeting. The January 2013 Consultative Meeting of Officials in Fields of State Security and Foreign Affairs was attended by key figures in the military, public security and intelligence services, manufacturers of conventional military equipment and nuclear weapons and missile-related equipment, as well as diplomatic officials dealing with China and the US. It seems that this organization has been established in the image of China’s Central Foreign Affairs Leading Group.

As discussed above, Kim Jong Un has consciously involved the power elites of North Korea in collective policymaking to enhance their roles, while at the same time mercilessly oppressing any challenges to his authority. The execution last December of Jang Song Thaek, who was vice-chairman of the National Defense Commission, demonstrated that anyone who challenges the leadership of Kim Jong Un can expect to become the target of extreme terror, even if they are a family member.

COURTING THE PUBLIC AND PURSUING ECONOMIC REFORMS AND OPENING

Almost as soon as Kim Jong Il died, Kim Jong Un revealed that his own ruling style would be in stark contrast with his father’s. When visiting units of the KPA, he would hold the hands of military officers and walk with them or inspect the accommodations and cafeterias of soldiers to communicate the image of a “friendly and warm leader.” This was very different from Kim Jong II, who projected a mystical, distant image, avoiding physical contact with the public for security
reasons, Kim Jong Un’s more affable approach immediately provoked comparisons with his grandfather, Kim Il Sung.

At the military parade held in Kim II Sung Square on April 15, 2012, Kim Jong Un once again revealed himself to be different from his father, who never addressed the public through speeches on such occasions. Like his grandfather, he presented the WPK’s thinking directly to the public in order to gain their support. After Kim II Sung’s death in 1994, Kim Jong Il chose not to deliver a New Year’s address, instead presenting the party’s thinking in editorials that appeared in the official newspapers of the WPK, the Army, and the Youth League. In contrast, following in the footsteps of Kim II Sung, Kim Jong Un personally delivered the New Year’s address in 2013 and 2014, once again deepening the impression that North Korean politics was returning to the time of Kim II Sung.

Kim Jong Un’s strong interest in pursuing economic reform and opening was slowly revealed after the death of Kim Jong Il. In an interview with the Associated Press on Jan. 16, 2012, Yang Hyong Sop, vice-president of the Presidium of the Supreme People’s Assembly (SPA), said that Kim Jong Un was interested in creating a knowledge-based economy and studying the examples of economic reform in other countries, including China. This was the first time that a key North Korean figure openly revealed Kim Jong Un’s interest in economic reforms.

On April 16, 2012, the Japanese newspaper Mainichi Shimbun reported, quoting from a copy of a Jan. 28, 2012, speech by Kim Jong Un that it had obtained, that Kim was encouraging talks on economic reform with power elites in North Korea. According to the newspaper, Kim Jong Un said, “When officials in the economic sector and economists propose to manage the economy in such and such a way, people with stereotypes criticize them, saying that they are trying to introduce capitalist methods. Thus, even if some have opinions on methods for economic management, they tend not to speak up.” Mainichi Shimbun reported that he instructed North Korean policymakers to come up with an economic development plan for North Korea based on discussions free of taboos.

In June 2012, North Korea adopted new economic policies that offered bigger incentives and autonomy to co-operative farms and enterprises, and it was reported that economic reform tests were carried out in some selected areas of the country. Finally, at the Plenary Meeting of the WPK Central Committee held in March 2013, Kim Jong Un personally proposed the development of private agriculture and light industries; conversion to a knowledge-based economy; the systematic application of technology for the economy; the development and launching of satellites; improvements in economic guidance and management; diversification of trade; development of tourism districts; and the construction of “economic development districts.” In addition, he called for more research into new methods of economic management. He then promoted Pak Pong Ju, an economic reformer who was in charge of the Light Industry Department of the WPK Central Committee, to become a member of the Political Bureau of the WPK Central Committee.

In conclusion, it appears that Kim Jong Un’s public-friendly politics and his pursuit of economic reforms and opening have been significant steps in consolidating his status as the supreme leader in North Korea.

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