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A succession with a difference?

LSE IDEAS

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The news of the death of North Korea's great leader, Kim Jong Il, is now being carried as the central story of all the world's media and yet the reaction in South Korea is muted. CNN, ABC, and BBC newscasters ask, will this historic passing be the catalysis for an opening of the hermit kingdom under a more reformist leader? Or will it embolden the ruling military class and encourage them to follow a more aggressive, hardliner policy? Or will it be business-as-usual for the rogue state? The answer to this, as with many of the questions that surround the secretive state, is unknown. However, in reflecting upon the aftermath of the death of Kim Jong Il's father, Kim Il Sung, some interesting differences may provide us with a hint as to what the future holds for the DPRK.



Though we should expect the streets, as they were in 1994 after the death of the Dear Leader Kim Il Sung, to be filled with mourners crying and waiting for the loss of their leader and great pomp and ceremony to envelop the funeral, feelings beneath the façade will be different. Of course, Kim Jong Un, like Kim Jong Il before him, will take the helm as leader for a two year period of mourning before being anointed with grand title that will signify his official assumption of power. However, the people will feel the loss of Kim Jong Il much less deeply than the propaganda machine of the DPRK claims. Kim Il Sung was a guerrilla fighter of repute, a national hero, and a charismatic and powerful man who was genuinely loved by his people, while his son, did not occupy the hearts of the people to the extent that his father had.

Escapees have told of a growing willingness to blame the regime for failures within the state, the *juche* ideology has been weakened by the growth of market values in the country and the leader-cult that weakened in the power transition from Kim Il Sung to Kim Jong-Il will again be diluted as Kim Jong Un becomes leader. Though, mass revolts or an 'Arab Spring' in the East, should not be expected, this power transition will be yet another incremental step that may weaken the power of the Kim-family-regime in the eyes of its people.

Secondly, in 1994, when Kim Jong il became the de-facto leader of North Korea, his position in the party and as part of the belief system of the DPRK had already been established. Kim Jong Il had been groomed for the role and the people, and most importantly, the military, had been prepared for his succession. Kim Jong Un, despite being made a four-star general, joining his father on official trips and possibly being behind the attacks on Young-pyong Island and the Cheonan last year, is far less established. The recent rushes of purges that have been carried out this year indicate that the regime felt the need to cement his position. A power struggle therefore could be more likely this time round. Though confidant, Chang Song-taek, was appointed by Kim Jong Il as his son's guardian and regent in order to negate such a threat, it is unclear whether he and the military will fully support the inexperienced heir. Should the military take control of the country, a more aggressive posture could be adopted.

These differences in the two family successions may be instrumental in causing some form of change in the DRPK and will undoubtedly be seized upon by those who hope rather than expect a transformation. However, the placid response of the South Koreans, a state that has lived alongside its cousins since they established the socialist paradise indicates that a business-as-usual North Korea may be the most likely one to emerge from this uncertain period. That aside, in the long term, the death of Kim Jong Il and the succession of his son, may help to widen the cracks that are appearing in the system.

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