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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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No. 135/2012 dated 26 July 2012

## **North Korea: Regime Reform or Cosmetic Change?**

By Sarah Teo

### **Synopsis**

*Kim Jong-un is showing signs of reforms in North Korea's leadership. However, regime survival remains the top priority of Pyongyang.*

### **Commentary**

Since Kim Jong-un took over leadership of North Korea in December 2011, a number of developments have sparked off debate on the new leader's goals for the reclusive state. Some experts assess that North Korea is slowly but surely undergoing some sort of reform, while others note that Pyongyang's policy initiatives serve only to reinforce the personality cult surrounding the Kim family.

Recent developments in North Korea, which seem to signify some shift in the leadership's policy, should be interpreted with the survival agenda of the Kim leadership in mind. Tools to prop up the Kim regime, including ideology, the military, and information control, are merely the means to sustain the leadership, even if Pyongyang seems to be taking positive steps towards 'opening up.'

### **Changing times in North Korea**

Surprising shifts have occurred in North Korea under the leadership of Kim Jong-un. In February 2012, North Korea agreed to suspend its nuclear and missile programmes, as well as allow foreign nuclear inspectors into the country, in exchange for food aid from the U.S. About two weeks later, however, North Korea launched a satellite to mark the 100th birth anniversary of North Korean founder Kim Il-sung. Although the launch failed, the U.S. and other states saw it as a cover for a long-range missile test and decried the move as a violation of UNSC resolutions, subsequently calling off the aid deal.

While the cycle of negotiations interrupted by provocations is not new for North Korea, its admission of the launch failure was unexpected. In 2009, when a similar failure occurred, North Korean state media applauded the "successful launch of [the] satellite." The regime's admission of its failure this time was thus seen as a relaxation of its tight control over information.

Likewise, when Disney characters appeared on North Korean television in July 2012, some speculated that the public embrace of Western cultural elements could be the first step to changing the North's strong anti-U.S. stance. Indeed, the image of Kim Jong-un and the audience – consisting mostly of military officers – clapping

for the Disney-costumed performers were at odds with North Korea's frequent condemnation of the "U.S. imperialists."

Most recently, the dismissal of Vice-Marshal Ri Yong-ho from all his posts and the subsequent appointment of Kim Jong-un as Marshal was seen as an attempt to consolidate the latter's power over the military. Ri had reportedly been a close friend of former leader Kim Jong-il and was a strong supporter of the latter's songun (military-first) policy. A source close to Pyongyang and Beijing was quoted by Reuters saying that Ri was sacked for opposing Kim Jong-un's plans for economic reform.

What do these developments mean for North Korea?

### **Regime survival still the top priority**

For the three-generation Kim leadership, regime survival has always been the ultimate aim. This goal has been sustained through various means. Domestically, Pyongyang feeds its citizens with propaganda, sends 'dissidents' to political prison camps or re-education camps, and restricts the flow of outside information into North Korea. Internationally, North Korea utilises its nuclear weapons programme to deter the threat of foreign invasion. Under Kim Jong-il, the military's position was also elevated, and it was given priority over civilians in terms of resources such as food.

Kim Jong-un's actions in the past eight months, however, suggest that Pyongyang may be changing its strategy, even though regime survival remains the leadership's top priority. This change in strategy is likely to have occurred for two reasons.

First, North Koreans are gradually getting access to information from the outside world. A study published in May 2012 by research firm InterMedia concluded that despite the tight control over information, North Koreans are increasingly able to access foreign media such as DVDs and radio broadcasts. This means that their perceptions of their own country, as well as other states, could possibly change. In this new information landscape, domestic propaganda and a media blackout on outside information may not work as well as it used to.

Second, the North Korean economy is in shambles. The CIA World Factbook estimates that North Korea's GDP per capita in 2011 was US\$1,800. In comparison, South Korea's GDP per capita was estimated to be US\$32,100. Foreign reports on North Korea's economic woes cite the country's isolation and mismanagement as the main sources of the problem. Food shortages and corruption worsen the situation. Despite official rhetoric in the 2012 Joint New Year Editorial that the country had made great strides towards becoming "an economic giant in the 21st century," Kim Jong-un and his leadership should realise that the songun policy has been detrimental to the economy.

Defector accounts note that while North Koreans respected Kim Il-sung, many did not feel the same toward Kim Jong-il. In their book *The Hidden People of North Korea: Everyday Life in the Hermit Kingdom*, Ralph Hassig and Kongdan Oh write that North Korean defectors felt that Kim Jong-il "[did not] care about the people the way (they thought) his father did." This view was reinforced by the songun policy, which directed resources away from civilians to the military.

It is thus no surprise that the latest Kim leader has fashioned himself after his grandfather rather than father. Much has been said about how much Kim Jong-un's looks resembles Kim Il-sung's. Like his grandfather, the younger Kim has opted for a more populist approach, visiting kindergartens and interacting with ordinary North Koreans. His apparent relaxation of information restrictions and penchant for reform may also signal a shift from his father's leadership.

In the face of a new information environment and continued economic woes, it is essential for Kim Jong-un to legitimise his rule in North Korea. Only with the people's support would the Kim regime enjoy little opposition – covert or otherwise – to its rule, allowing it to focus its resources on other more urgent issues. To cultivate popular support for the regime, methods used by Kim Jong-il are unlikely to be as effective as compared to the past. Kim Jong-un will need to continue finding new ways to establish popular support in the changing North Korea.

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