

Another hereditary transfer of power and change in public sentiment in North Korea

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It appears that North Korean leader Kim Jong-il is taking steps to transfer his leadership to his third son Kim Jong-un. Such a hereditary transfer of political power in three generations scarcely has a parallel in modern history and it is difficult to predict whether it will be successful. Recently, the North's mass media mentioned the name of Kim Jong-un (now in his late 20s) right after those of Kim Jong-il and Kim Young-nam (President of the Supreme People's Assembly Presidium), showing that the process of hereditary transfer of power between the two is well under way, perhaps more smoothly than observers had expected, at least on the surface. However, public sentiment, which is rapidly becoming alienated from the regime, is likely to become a crucial variable in the transfer of power and the future of relations between the two Koreas. This paper will state some of the factors that will have an impact on the interaction between the ongoing hereditary transfer of power and the change in public feeling.

Factors of interaction between the hereditary transfer of power and public sentiment

First, the North's regime has been unable to secure a means of soothing the feelings of the public, which turned its back on the regime particularly due to the failure of the currency reform in late 2009. In the past, the regime paid scant attention to public sentiment. However, it appears that Kim Jong-il needs to appease public sentiment badly in connection with his plan to transfer power to his son. In

early 2010, the North's National Defense Committee Chairman admitted that his country still had not attained the goal of feeding "white rice with meat soup" to the people, which had been set by Kim Jong-il's father Kim Il-sung. Such an admission has been interpreted as the gesture of a leader who is sensitively conscious of public sentiment. Kim Jong-il paid an unprecedented three visits to the North's closest ally, China, in the year after May 2010. However, it was reported that he did not receive a gift from China that would make his starving people happy.

Second, the regime recently prohibited its construction workers in the Middle East from returning home for fear that their return might spread to North Korea the Jasmine Revolution started in that part of the world. The regime displayed its intention not to hide its readiness to shore up the system by purchasing a large quantity of equipment for use against the large-scale street demonstrations it probably fears might be staged by the starving people. Pak Nam-gi, Director of the Planning and Finance Department of the ruling party of North Korea, was executed by firing squad as a punishment for his failure to bring about successful currency reform. Recently, a North Korean was executed in public on a charge of providing information on rice prices in the North to South Korea. This ever-more repressive rule indicates that the North is short of soft-power resources. It also indicates that the regime's internal solidarity is weakening, while the ongoing transfer of power to Kim Jeon-un, who takes after his grandfather Kim Il-sung, has failed to deliver a message of hope to North Koreans.

Third, ordinary North Koreans have come to harbor extreme distrust of and discontent with the party and the leadership amid widespread corruption, including their having to pay bribes to higher authorities, and being squeezed to earn foreign currencies, amid a scenario in which "the rich get richer and the poor get poorer," and a game of hide-and-seek in which the people try to form their own markets and the authorities try to crack down on them. Amid such an environment, the state-set mechanisms designed to obtain the people's political consensus, such as Sanenghwal Chohwa (a periodical session in which self-criticism is forced on the people), have become a session in name only. Such a situation is likely to disturb the workings of the ruling system in the post-Kim Jong-il era.

Fourth, there has been a dramatic change in the consciousness of ordinary North Korean people due to the adoption of materialism as a dominant social value and the rapid spread of information on markets. In particular, the spread of the South's culture, including TV dramas, pop music, and films, in the North even indicates the possibility of change in the fundamental nature of the North's regime. Recently, some North Koreans have said that they decided to defect to the South for a better quality of life and better education for their children after watching South-made TV dramas. Nonetheless, the North's regime is only intent on suppressing the people's desire for change and stopping the flow of information across the world's most tightly shut borders in the era of

information.

Extreme measures taken to justify the hereditary transfer of power

The current situation, in which the North's people are turning their backs on the regime, leads one to doubt the efficacy of the efforts to get the North Korean people to idolize Kim Jong-un. The regime has to push ahead with the hereditary transfer of power under such an unfavorable structural environment. The ongoing power transfer process appears to be facing a dilemma, as it is difficult for any type of political power to take root among people who are turning their backs on the leadership.

If the people continue to turn a cold shoulder to the regime with no expectations whatsoever regarding the hereditary transfer of power, and if such a situation deteriorates further, the regime will find it difficult to resist the appeal of taking extreme measures to settle the entire situation all at once. The North's sinking of the South's naval vessel ROKS Cheonan (PCC-772) in March 2010 and the shelling of Yeonpyeongdo Island in November 2010 may have been designed to consolidate internal solidarity by turning the attention of the discontented people to the outside and linking it with an effort to justify the hereditary transfer of power. The recent large-scale island-occupation maneuvers carried out by North Korean troops recently may be a sign of plans for another provocative action against the South.

A more serious problem is that time is not on the side of the North, which continues to reiterate the slogan of the construction of a strong country by 2012. Even the people who are on the market to sell anything in their hands to get something they need are asked to contribute funds to construct a strong country. In such a dire situation, the leadership is likely to perpetrate "a bigger act" out of its obsession with showing something wonderful to the people by the "year of promise." In other words, "time bomb"-like situations are being provoked here and there to justify the hereditary transfer of power to the people. That being the case, those in the South need to deal wisely with the risk factors created by the North's ongoing transfer of power and public sentiment towards it.

Winning the hearts of North Koreans

The South's Government should positively review the need to provide food to the starving people in the North on condition of having it monitored by international organizations lest it should be diverted to other purposes. It is not desirable to stick to the strict principle of reciprocity, as we need to approach the matter from a humanistic perspective and to win the hearts of North Koreans. It is also

necessary to consider restoring the inter-Korea economic collaboration in the private sector by stages. Our unification policy should start with an effort to cope flexibly with the flow of changes made among the people in the North, despite the succession of the North's repressive rule.

It will not be easy for the Southern Government to take a consistent attitude toward the North's regime, which has refused to apologize for the sinking of the ROKS Cheonan (PCC-772) and the shelling of Yeonpyeongdo Island, and its starving people. However, it is by no means desirable to merely watch with folded arms the North Koreans' miserable situation or the subordination of the North's economy to China amid the extremely tense situation between the two Koreas.

Inter-Korean economic collaboration should not be viewed merely from a viewpoint associated with the need to confirm the economic collaboration between the North and China. Inter-Korean economic collaboration is useful at least in connection with the need to obtain leverage against the North. It is necessary to build up strategic wisdom in a way that gives hope to the people in the North and promotes their feelings of brotherly affection for the South through the provision of humanitarian support.



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