

## [North Korea's New Boy-General Generates Chatter—and Angst](#)



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This week's high-profile appointment of Kim Jong-un, the third and youngest son of North Korean leader Kim Jong-il, to four-star general and vice chairman of the ruling party's Central Military Commission has generated intense chatter within the South Korean media.

With the consensus being that the younger Kim is being positioned as to succeed his 69-year-old father, who is widely believed to be in failing health, opinions range from fears that North Korea will become a protectorate of China to shame over the anachronism of a communist monarchical tradition in the North.

The *Korea Times* in Seoul quoted South Korea's Ministry of Unification as saying the release of the first-ever government-sanctioned photo of the 27-year-old Kim indicates that "North Korea has begun a campaign to rally public support for the heir-apparent, while speeding up the father-to-son succession."

Widely believed to have been educated in Berne, Switzerland, and to be a fluent speaker of German and English, the soon-to-be leader of the world's most isolated nation is otherwise little known inside or outside his country. The father-to-son transfer of power, if and when it takes place, would mark the world's first-ever three-generation communist dynasty. Kim Jong-il, who remains the sole leader of the country, took power after his own father, state founder and "president for life" Kim Il-sung, died in 1994.

"Kim Jong-un is still young and inexperienced," says Chang Hyun Roh, news director for New York Radio Korea and a correspondent with the Internet news service Newsroh.

Pointing to reports that the elder Kim had a stroke two years ago and is suffering from diabetes and kidney problems, Chang says it's likely that his brother-in-law, Jang Song-taek—considered the state's No. 2 leader—and his wife, Kim Kyung Hui, who was also elevated to the post of four-star general this week, will provide “strong protection” to the younger Kim.

Kwang-min Choi, managing editor of the *Korea Daily* in Oakland, expressed disgust over the recent developments. “Considering the state of North Korean society, filled with starving children and countless numbers looking to escape, it is inconceivable how Kim can justify his ruling over the people like a king.”

Tae-soo Jeong, editor with the Korean language *Korea Times* in San Francisco, offered a similarly acrimonious assessment. “It's like a comedy, the idea of a hereditary communist monarchy in the 21st century.” He added, however, that given the various internal factions scrambling for power in Pyongyang, Kim places utmost trust in his own “bloodline.”

That line of reasoning is echoed elsewhere. Writing for the Web site The National Interest, Doug Bandow, senior fellow at the conservative Cato Institute, notes: “Too many officials (in North Korea) have been waiting too long for their turn to voluntarily turn over control to another Kim, especially another one whose only claim to power is his parentage.” Among the officials Bandow speculates would be less-than-thrilled with the younger Kim's anointment are Jang Song-taek and his wife.

An article in the conservative Korean daily *Chosun Ilbo* quoted statements by several North Korean soldiers, aired on Radio Free Asia a day earlier, expressing skepticism about the handover of power. “(The military) had accepted Kim Jong-il without much difficulty when he was promoted to supreme commander because his personality cult had been built up for a long time. But in Jong-un's case they wonder what the 20-something has done to become a four-star general?”

The developments in North Korea come at a time when relations with the South have sunk to the lowest point in decades. The two Koreas remain bitterly divided over the sinking of a South Korean naval vessel in March that killed 48 sailors. A team of international investigators laid responsibility for the sinking with North Korea, a claim both Pyongyang and Beijing have refused to accept.

But in a sign of the often-conflicting policies coming out of the North, Seoul announced today that the two sides had agreed to restart cross-border reunions of families separated since the 1950-53 Korean War. Some 100 families from both sides will be allowed to meet in October at a mountain resort in the North. The upcoming round of reunions will be the first since they were cut off amid deteriorating relations in late 2009.

Peter Hayes with the Nautilus Institute, which works to promote international cooperation on such issues as denuclearization, says that such seemingly contradictory tactics out of the North are part of a larger strategy aimed at internal consolidation and regional

maneuvering. “Kim Jong-il is firmly in charge, and he is moving around parts of the pyramid of power to maintain his absolute control. Doing so entails keeping everyone off balance.”

Having just returned from China, where he orchestrated a meeting between North and South Koreans, Hayes says he believes the North is “fast becoming a de facto protectorate” of its larger communist neighbor. “Kim Jong-il has communicated clearly to China that the DPRK intends to have a multi-generational nuclear armed state and that he is willing to pay the economic and political price of Chinese backing to achieve a smooth succession.”

It’s a fear widely shared among many in South Korea. Chang, with New York Radio Korea, says there is widespread concern about North Korea becoming a satellite country of China, “an event that would diminish any hope of a future unification of the two countries.”