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First in the Nation

Dictator who likes basketball, not reform

By: Doug Bandow – March 22, 2013

Gone is the “Dear Leader” and sophisticated fashionista Kim Jong-il, with his platform shoes, bouffant hair, and oversize sun glasses. However, his son and “Great Successor” Kim Jong-un is fast becoming an international sensation, along with his wife, Ri Sol-ju, and U.S. basketball legend Dennis Rodman.

Kim has broken the mold of his two totalitarian predecessors, attending prep school in Switzerland, following American basketball, enjoying Disney characters and showcasing his attractive young wife carrying a designer purse. All of this has given rise to speculation that Kim is a closet reformer.

The communist monarch recently hung out with Rodman, who lauded the “epic feast” organized by his “friend,” who was an “awesome guy.” Rodman also called Kim’s father and grandfather, whose victims could fill the heavens, “great leaders.”

Alas, a European education doesn’t guarantee democratic tendencies. China’s Chou Enlai studied in Paris, as did the genocidal Pol Pot. London-trained ophthalmologist Syrian Bashar al-Assad is killing his people.

Maybe the trappings of the West aren’t enough. But Kim Jong-un apparently has become a father, preempting Britain’s Prince William. Surely that will make Kim a liberal free-thinker.

The South Korean media is reporting that Ri gave birth last month. There was no public announcement, however, suggesting that the baby was a girl. Alas, Kim appears to be a male chauvinist, just like most everyone surrounding him. Although Kim’s aunt, Kim Kyong-hui – Kim Jong-il’s favorite sister – remains a power in the regime, the leadership otherwise is male. Maybe Kim Jong-un isn’t a secret liberal after all.

But then, his behavior tells us that. Economic reform is an obvious necessity and he has talked about raising living standards amid rumors of changes in both agricultural and industrial policy. However, so far economic reform appears to be more talk than reality, with the regime simply swapping deck chairs on the Titanic. Rather than reduce Pyongyang’s almost total control, his government has shifted responsibility for lucrative business operations back from the military to the party and focused on making deals with China.

The only significant political change has been his government’s reassertion of party domination over the military. The “awesome” Kim has not backed away from his father’s “military first” policy when it comes to resources: North Koreans may be hungry, but Pyongyang found money for a nuclear test this year and two rocket launches in 2012.

It isn't easy to measure domestic repression except through the reports of refugees, and there are fewer of them because Pyongyang has tightened border controls. Now few North Koreans have a chance to even risk a rush to freedom.

Finally, the government formally headed by Kim (whether he is really in charge, part of a collective leadership, or more of a figurehead is not obvious) has continued with the North's long-time policy of brinkmanship and provocation. The North Korean military command threatened to respond to new U.N. sanctions by canceling the 1953 ceasefire. The Kim regime explained, "We aim to launch surgical strikes at any time and any target without being bounded by the armistice accord and advance our long-cherished wish for national unification."

So much for Kim heading a reform parade.

Indeed, the risks of liberalization for not just Kim but the entire elite ruling class are high. The North Korean population has suffered and starved for decades and increasingly knows that the system is a lie. Relax totalitarian controls and a lot of "awesome" people, starting with the Great Successor, might end up adorning lampposts.

Which means not much is likely to change. Pyongyang sees a nuclear arsenal as the way to prevent American-supported regime change and continued repression as the way to prevent a grassroots revolution. Nothing has happened in the 14 months since Kim's ascension likely to revise that judgment.

This isn't an argument against any engagement, but against the persistent triumph of hope over experience form of engagement. There is no military option, since the most important objective on the peninsula is to maintain the peace. Isolation has failed and will continue to fail without Chinese support. Official aid and subsidized trade have only underwritten North Korean misbehavior. Years of negotiations have not produced an enforceable nuclear settlement.

The U.S. and the North's neighbors should be open to any meaningful North Korean overture while preparing for a world in which the DPRK survives and expands its nuclear capabilities. Pyongyang's unique system of monarchical communism will end some day. But it increasingly looks like any change will occur despite, not because, of the Great Successor.

Kim Jong-un appears to genuinely like basketball. Unfortunately, that does not make him a reformer. He just happens to be a dictator who likes basketball.