

Kim's death draws mixed reactions in Korea

By Calum MacLeod, USA TODAY

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SEOUL – The death of Kim Jong Il sent thousands of people into the streets in [North Korea](#) wailing in grief but in [South Korea](#) a sense of fear over the future consumed residents.

Kim's death from a heart attack at age 69 was announced Monday by state television in a "special broadcast" from the [North Korean](#) capital, Pyongyang, the Associated Press reported.

On the streets of Pyongyang people cried, some kneeling on the ground or bowing repeatedly. Children and adults laid flowers at memorials.

As the government's [Central Committee](#) announced Kim's son, Kim Jong Un, a "great successor" and the "outstanding leader of our party, army and people," South Korea put its military on high alert and President Lee Myung Bak convened a national security council meeting.

"The stock market already went down, and I worry about the economic situation in South Korea," said Han Dong-Yeobhe, who was selling ladies' bags in central Seoul's bustling Dongdaemun street market on Monday.

"I expect Kim Jong Un will be like his father," said Kim Dong-Hyun, a management consultant in Seoul. "But I hope North Korea can slowly open up their economy, like China. Slow change is better for South Korea's economy, too," he said, voicing fears of the huge costs estimated if reunification with the impoverished North ever takes place.

The [Korean Central News Agency](#) reported that Kim "suffered an advanced acute myocardial infarction, complicated with a serious heart shock, on train on December 17 for a great mental and physical strain caused by his uninterrupted field guidance tour for the building of a thriving nation."

An autopsy on Sunday confirmed the diagnosis, the news agency said.

North Korea will hold a national mourning period until Dec. 29. Kim's funeral will be Dec. 28, it said.

Yonhap reported that North Korea conducted at least one short-range missile test on Monday, but two [South Korean](#) military officials said they couldn't confirm the report and that any firing would be part of a routine drill.

A senior [U.S.](#) defense official said Monday the launch of two missiles by North Korea does not appear linked to Kim's death. The official said the launches were likely planned before his death.

[President Obama](#) spoke with the South Korean president at midnight.

"The president reaffirmed the [United States'](#) strong commitment to the stability of the [Korean Peninsula](#) and the security of our close ally, the Republic of Korea," said a [White House](#) readout of the phone call.

"The two leaders agreed to stay in close touch as the situation develops and agreed they would direct their national security teams to continue close coordination," the White House added.

U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta "is closely monitoring the situation," said Navy Capt. [John Kirby](#), his spokesman. He would not discuss whether U.S. forces in the region were on heightened alert.

Army Gen. [Martin Dempsey](#), chairman of the [Joint Chiefs of Staff](#), is in contact with top commanders in the region and is keeping track of developments, said Marine Col. David Lapan, his spokesman.

[Michael Green](#), a former senior director of Asia Affairs at the [National Security Council](#) during the [George W. Bush](#) administration, said Kim's death comes months ahead of the 100th anniversary of the birth of his father, former president Kim Il Sung, who is regarded as the regime's "eternal president." Green said Kim Jong Un may try to use the April milestone to conduct a nuclear test.

"It would allow him to flex his muscles and show the military that he's really in charge," Green said.

Bush had denounced North Korea as a member of an "axis of evil" that included Iran and Iraq. He described Kim Jong Il as a "tyrant" who starved his people to build nuclear weapons.

Regime collapse is hardly imminent, said professor Tong Kim, an international relations expert at Korea University in Seoul.

"All of Kim Jong Il's relatives and the generals are in the same boat, and they will try hard to keep the boat afloat for a while," he said. "There will be no sudden change or crumbling of the regime for a while."

Despite Kim's clear anointing of his son, North Korea may become embroiled in a power struggle that could be violent, CATO senior fellow Doug Bandow said.

The young Kim "has had little time to establish himself," Bandow said. "There are several potential claimants to supreme authority in the North, and the military may play kingmaker."

On the Korean language version of the Twitter micro-blogging site, many users on Monday posted worries about the South Korean economy, and fears that the South Korean and U.S. governments are playing up the North Korean threat for their own ends.

Such political dissent would earn jail time or worse across the 38th parallel, but South Korea is defiantly democratic, permitting criticism of the U.S. forces based in the country.

"I know that the U.S. is supporting South Korea and Japan to restrict China," said Han Dong-Yeob. "I do not want them too deeply involved in this. I do not want the South Korean government to be used by the U.S. government."

As North Korean media Monday showed citizens distraught at the news of Kim's death don't assume that emotion is fake, said [Brian Myers](#), a North Korea expert at Dongseo University in South Korea.

"Many people in the United States assume the regime survives only by dint of repression, and that's not the case," he said.

Although [North Koreans](#) do not revere Kim Jong Il to the same extent as his father Kim Il Sung, he's been their leader for almost two decades, and "they've been led to believe they are secure only because of the 'Dear General' and his 'Military First' policy," Myers said. "They feel their country is strong, and feared and respected around the world."

"He has been a constant in their lives, someone people have seen more than their own parents or children," said Simon Cockerell, who has visited the country 108 times since 2002. Cockerell is the general manager of Koryo Tours, a British tour operator based in Beijing.

"Every apartment in every building, and every office, has a portrait of Kim Jong Il, he's in the newspapers every day even though he never speaks in public, and he dominates the TV news," Cockerell said. "If he visits a duck farm, it's bigger news than anything in the world."

Kim Yong-Hyun, a North Korean expert at Seoul's Dongguk University, believes that "in the short term, they will keep Kim Jong Il's policy, which is a very conservative way. But in the middle and long term, they will change.

Park Su-Hyun, a former palace guard for Kim Il Sung who later defected in 1993, said that Kim's Jong Il's death shocked him less than that of his father, Kim Il Sung, when "I couldn't breathe and worried about war."

Now a Chinese medicine doctor in Seoul, Park, 45, said "I know that whenever these kind of things happen, North Korean people gets scared the most. I think they are 10 times more scared than South Korean army."

Kim Jong Il ruled North Korea with an iron fist for 17 years. Few expected him to last long when he succeeded his father in 1994. The pudgy 5-foot-3 Kim — who favored pompadours and beige jumpsuits — took power at a treacherous time. The [Soviet Union](#) had crumbled three years earlier, depriving North Korea of its closest communist ally and most generous economic benefactor.

The North Korean economy imploded in the 1990s. Famine killed as many as 1 million North Koreans from 1995 to 2000. Yet Kim managed to hang on to power, ruthlessly repressing internal dissent with executions and a brutal prison system that holds hundreds of thousands of political prisoners, including children, according to [Human Rights Watch](#).

Kim kept his generals happy by handing them 25% of his indigent country's budget under a policy of "Military First" that ignored the needs of his hungry, impoverished people. Still, He rallied the public by presenting North Korea as a racially pure state besieged by evil foreigners, especially the Americans who kept thousands of troops garrisoned across the Demilitarized Zone in South Korea. The DMZ is a remnant of the [Korean War](#) when the North invaded South Korea in 1950, sparking a three-year war.

Kim developed a nuclear program — with tests in 2006 and 2009 — used as a potential threat to extort aid from his enemies and stoke a xenophobic local pride that kept his people unified and loyal during a period of intense hardship. His brinkmanship with nuclear and missile tests made North Korea a player to be reckoned with — even though it ranks only a pitiful No. 189 in world economic output per capita.

Kim's death is a full-blown "state crisis" for North Korea, said Park Young-Ho, senior researcher at the Korea Institute for National Unification in Seoul. "I don't think there will be significant movement in a short time period, but we must watch closely whether or not Kim Jong Un's power remains solid."

According to North Korean mythology, Kim was born on sacred Mount Paektu in an event marked by the auspicious appearance of a double rainbow and a special star shining in the heavens. In fact, he was likely born in the [Russian Far East](#), according to *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader*, a history of North Korea's leaders by journalist Bradley K. Martin.

Kim Jong Il's father, Kim Il Sung, had led a communist guerrilla force fighting the Japanese occupation of the Korean peninsula. After World War II, the Soviet-backed Kim Il Sung became North Korea's leader.

Kim Jong Il's mother died when he was 7. He worked hard to please his father, even taste-testing his food for poison. He helped purge veteran communists who balked at Kim Il Sung's attempts to create his own cult of personality.

The efforts to ingratiate himself worked, allowing Kim Jong Il to outmaneuver a stepmother plotting to put her own son in line to take power.

Throughout the 1970s and '80s, Kim Jong Il carefully stacked the North Korean bureaucracy with his supporters and weeded out those of questionable loyalty. He stayed out of the public eye. State-run media referred to a mysterious "party

center" known for his wisdom, but rarely mentioned him by name. In 1980, Kim Il Sung named him heir apparent, giving the world its first communist dynasty. Even before taking power, Kim Jong Il was associated with murderous and hare-brained schemes. He personally ordered the 1987 bombing of South Korean airliner that left 115 dead, according to Kim Hyon Hui, one of the North Korean agents who planted the explosive.

A film buff who adored [Sean Connery](#) and [Elizabeth Taylor](#), Kim Jong Il kidnapped South Korean actress Choi Eun Hee and her movie director husband in a bizarre 1978 plan to jump-start a North Korean film industry.

In a 2003 interview with USA TODAY, Choi said Kim had a self-deprecating sense of humor, introducing himself by doing a pirouette and saying, "I look like a sack of dwarf's droppings, don't I?"

Choi and her husband produced 21 movies for Kim before escaping at an international film festival in 1986.

Kim's appearance and Bacchanalian habits — he was at one time the world's No. 1 consumer of Hennessy cognac, and he imported pizza and sushi chefs to feed him — made him a target of satire. He was, for instance, depicted as a foul-mouthed puppet in the 2004 film *Team America: World Police*.

Outsiders tried to bring him in from the cold. In its waning days, the Clinton administration sought to normalize diplomatic relations with North Korea but couldn't reach a deal. Two successive South Korean presidents — Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun — tried a "Sunshine Policy" of unconditional aid to Kim's regime; each visited the capital of Pyongyang. But their visits were never reciprocated.

[President George W. Bush](#) tried a different approach, treating Kim with hostility. Kim responded with its first nuclear test in 2006. The Bush team then switched to diplomacy. For a time, it seemed to work. Then Kim's provocations began again, culminating in another underground nuclear explosion in May 2009, testing just in time to test the Obama administration.

Despite U.S. threats, promises of aid and diplomatic recognition — nothing worked. To the end, Kim believed that his regime could not survive unless he kept his country forever mobilized for potential war, forever oppressed and forever isolated economically — whatever the cost to his 24 million people.

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