

Much has changed since the last Kim took over, but not in N Korea

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Upon arriving in Pyongyang on October 16, 1994, I was escorted directly to Kumsusan Memorial Palace. Tens of thousands of people, all clad in black, were lined up in rows outside, bowing their heads.

One hundred days had passed since the death of Kim Il-sung, North Korea's Great Leader, and in Korean tradition, the final memorial service was being held. Here and there a few anguished-looking mourners were on their knees, wailing.

No doubt we will witness similar images on March 25, when 100 days will have passed following the death of Kim Jong-il, the Dear Leader. Kim Jong-il's body will lie in state at Kumsusan until the funeral is held. Presumably, he will then be embalmed and laid to rest there beside his father.

Now, as was the case 17 years ago, the passing of a North Korean leader ushers in a period of significant uncertainty. Kim Jong-il was regarded as a reclusive, unknown entity, who some doubted had the ability to maintain absolute power. There was talk of coups. When Kim Jong-il took over from his father, North Korea had already been on a collision course with the US and the United Nations for 18 months over his father's refusal to allow international inspection of sites where it was believed nuclear weapons were being developed.

Pyongyang today remains on that same course after innumerable threats and empty promises to the international community.

Now, as then, North Korea is ruled by a brutal regime that sends tens of thousands of people classified as "unreliable" to their deaths in prison camps. A presumably well-cared-for elite comprises a tiny class of bureaucrats and military officers in Pyongyang. Now, as then, decision-making in North Korea remains opaque and outside observations are based on assumptions.

But, despite the sense of *deja vu*, there are stark differences between 1994 and today. Kim Jong-il was in his early 50s upon his father's death and had been groomed to become leader for more than two decades. His son, Kim Jong-un, believed to be 27, appeared publicly as heir apparent only 15 months ago. He is not only very young, but also unlikely to be prepared for the task ahead.

In 1994 it was conceivable that nearly the entire North Korean population had next to no knowledge of the outside world. Today, many - perhaps most - North Koreans know of the prosperity and personal freedoms in China and South Korea.

Years of famine have driven millions to risk their lives to scrounge for food across the Chinese border.

Based on meetings over recent years with North Korean officials at seminars in Beijing, younger members of the tiny elite in Pyongyang appear to be increasingly aware of world affairs. Admittedly, they express deep resentment of North Korea's being treated as a pariah because it has acquired nuclear capabilities to defend what they view as national security. On the other hand, it is difficult to imagine that the crowds of shoppers and new cars in Beijing's centre do not make China's road stand out as a modernisation path for their own country to emulate.

Several outside observers say that the entire society is so enmeshed in the absurd personality cult of the Kim-family dynasty that the elites must remain loyal to the young Kim Jong-un. However, one can question how long the military leaders or his aunt and uncle, anointed by Kim Jong-il to be the guardians of the heir apparent, will have the patience to remain on the sidelines, watching a young man practise governance.

This is especially pertinent if there are those among the elites who favour embarking on economic reform and the young leader does not. In particular Kim Jong-un's uncle, Jang Song-taek, has been a frequent visitor to China and is believed to favour reforms.

One thing is certain: Beijing will retain its pivotal role as North Korea's most reliable supporter, but one can expect the Chinese leaders in private meetings to increase pressure on the new North Korean leadership to reform the economy.

As for its nuclear program, there is little hope Pyongyang will give it up. From a North Korean perspective, it's the country's only bargaining chip with the rest of the world.

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