Kim Jong-II died of heart failure on December 17th 2011, what is the significance of his death for North Korea?

In some ways the sky has fallen in North Korea. Refugees I met in Seoul and Tokyo said that when they lived in the North the leaders were like two pieces of the sky. One piece of the sky fell with the death of Kim Il-Sung in 1994 and on December 17th 2011, the second piece fell. What they meant was that the leaders defined their world, brought good days or bad, constituted all that they knew.

That is how they used to think, but living in relative safety outside of the North with the new perspective gained through leaving home, it is not uncommon for North Koreans to refer to Kim Jong-II with an explicative attached to his name. They readily see his culpability in the horrendous rights violations inside the country. Indeed, if there is any mourning within the North Korean refugee community, it is because there is no longer a chance to bring Kim Jong-II to International Criminal Court or to assassinate him. The refugee community is likely to have mixed feelings of relief and frustration, such as we saw over the death of Gaddafi in Libya. A world class criminal has slipped away without punishment. Any death is a great shock, and this one is no different. Though the North has prepared for it, a gaping uncertainty pervades this event. Will Kim Jung-Un be capable to his new role of leadership? Will the military seize this national distraction as an opportunity to enforce new governance? Will the tired cold war relic which is North Korea finally break down?

In my work with refugees in Seoul and Tokyo, they expressed a longing for this day and I imagine many of them are thrilled at the news. There is little to celebrate about North Korea, but finally we have something. Refugees I worked with longed for the death of Kim Jong-II because they identified his leadership as the source of their suffering, and the continued suffering of their friends and family back home.

The phrase decapitation of the regime has been used to describe opportunities for change in the country. Does the death of Kim Jong-II signify a “decapitation of the regime”?

The North Korean refugees I spoke with identified the death of Kim Jong-II as something which could bring change, but it was not seen as an event that would inevitably bring change. It takes more than one individual to turn a country into the kind of condition we see in North Korea. North Koreans know this best of all. Consider that while they lived in the North, often for many decades, they hardly once identified either leader as the cause of their difficulties. Instead, the country’s failings were attributed to the selfish changes in the social fabric of the
population, or negative outside forces. The locus of power in North Korea is represented by the leader, but the delivery of power, the abuse of power, is carried out indirectly on behalf of the leader. This is a crucial element in any regime’s control of a population.

There are literally millions of little Kim Jong-Il’s, ordinary government officials, soldiers, guards and police throughout the nation who carry out the abuse of power. Why they do this requires more explanation than there is space for here. The point I am making is that we need to consider that this type of regime is highly complex, the ordering and abuse of power is part of a system of control. The removal of a representative piece, here Kim Jong-Il, is hugely significant for what it represents, but in practice the system will likely carry on. This is why the North Koreans I spoke with identified the death of Kim Jong-Il as a potential for bringing change, but not a factor that would invariably bring positive change.

I worry that the regime has learned from the rocky years between former successions, with the death of Kim Il-Sung and the start of Kim Jong-Il’s leadership, and will take this opportunity to strengthen popular support for Kim Jung-un. Particularly as the death comes so close to the 2012 “Strong and Prosperous Nation” celebration which falls on the 100th anniversary of Kim Il-Sung’s birth. Kim Jung-un will be presented as the new young leader taking North Korea into 2012 and achieving North Korea’s promise of greatness. He has a lot of work ahead of him, but he will have plenty of support.

**What does the death of Kim Jong-Il mean for the region?**

The death of Kim Jong-Il is something North Korea watchers have been anticipating, particularly since learning of his ill health with his stroke in 2008. What this death means for North Korea, only time will tell. On an official level, the country has gone into a state of mourning which is said to last until December 29th 2011. As with the death of Kim Il-Sung, official news agency announcers have given the solemn, teary-eyed report of the leader’s death. Kim Jong-Il’s death was anticipated for some time, which is why Kim Jung-Un has been groomed for the leadership role.

Kim Jong-Il died in the midst of renewed diplomatic efforts to resume talks about the country’s nuclear weapons program. North Korea will likely cancel what would have been the third round of bilateral nuclear talks with the US in Beijing expected to take place next week. At the talks, North Korea was anticipated to accept the US offer of food aid in exchange for suspension of uranium enrichment. North Korea desperately needs food aid, in particular the military will need to be fed and they pose the only viable group that could cause significant political unrest, so I suspect they will return to the bargaining table with the US before too long. The bilateral talks were seen as a stepping stone towards resumption of the Six Party Talks, suspended since 2008.

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