

## Extra Feature Story

### North Korea's Military Posturing May Signal Leadership Shift

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**The secretive leader of North Korea Kim Jong II, who recently set off international alarm bells by testing missiles and a nuclear device, has signaled that his 26-year-old son will assume the ruling family dynasty.**

Imagine living in a country where the military controls what you see on TV and the internet, and life revolves around the cult of personality of the "Dear Leader," a short unpredictable man who wears platform shoes, drives fast cars and is obsessed with movies and theatrical spectacle.

One of the most isolated nations on the planet, North Korea has been developing nuclear weapons for decades. In May, North Korea conducted an underground nuclear test -- its second since 2006, and test-fired several missiles. It is believed to have missiles capable of reaching Hawaii or Alaska.

U.S. President Barack Obama strongly condemned the tests.

"North Korea's actions endanger the people of Northeast Asia, they are a blatant violation of international law, and they contradict North Korea's own prior commitments," he said.

#### **Questions about North Korea's leadership may fuel aggressive acts**

North Korea has been ruled by a family of dictators since it was formed in 1953 after the end of the Korean war, in which China backed the Communist North and the United States backed the South.

The first leader, Kim Il-sung was called the "Great Leader" and is enshrined in the country's constitution as the "Eternal President."

When he died in 1994, his son, "Dear Leader" Kim Jong II took over, and has maintained control with a brutal military regime.

Who will eventually rule the North has been the focus of intense media speculation since "Dear Leader" Kim, 67, reportedly suffered a stroke last summer. That sparked regional concerns about instability and a possible power struggle if he died without naming a successor.

Analysts believe he may be using the growing tension over nuclear and missile tests to give him greater leverage to nominate his own successor.

Immediately following the tests, North Korea sent a message to its diplomatic missions demanding diplomats pledge allegiance to Kim's 26-year-old third son, Jong Un, according to South Korean media reports.

#### **Little is known about Kim Jong II's son**

Little is known about the son, whose youth is a potential predicament in a society that greatly exalts the importance of seniority.

Born either in 1983 or early 1984, Kim Jong Un, studied at the International School of Berne in Switzerland and intelligence sources have said he appears to be the most capable of Kim's three known sons. While studying in Switzerland like his brothers, he avoided Western influences, returning home when not in school or eating with the North Korean ambassador, the BBC reported.

Kim Jong Il's former sushi chef, a Japanese man writing under the pseudonym Kenji Fujimoto, said in his memoir that the son looks and acts just like his father and is the leader's favorite.

Leader Kim has three known sons by two women. The eldest son, Jong Nam, 38, had long been considered the favorite to succeed his father -- until he was caught trying to enter Japan on a fake passport in 2001. He reportedly told Japanese officials he wanted to visit Tokyo Disneyland.

Fujimoto said Jong Un is the "spitting image" of his father, but the young Kim has never been photographed by the Western media, according to the BBC.

Kim Jong Un also apparently shares some of his father's health problems, and is reported to have diabetes and heart disease due to a lack of exercise.

Like his film-loving father, Jong Un is said to enjoy popular culture, and is apparently a fan of NBA basketball.

#### **One of the most isolated places in the world**

Kim Jong Il's regime has been accused of massive human rights abuses by different organizations. It controls the media, does not allow for dissent, and reportedly holds hundreds of thousands of political prisoners.

Journalist Christopher Hitchens described the country in a 2005 article in Slate magazine: "In North Korea, every person is property and is owned by a small and mad family with hereditary power. Every minute of every day, as far as regimentation can assure the fact, is spent in absolute subjection and serfdom. The private life has been entirely abolished," Hitchens wrote.

While it maintains a large army, it relies on foreign aid to feed its poor population and suffers from economic and military sanctions imposed by the United Nations in 2006 as punishment for its pursuit of a nuclear weapons program.

-- **Compiled by Quinn Bowman for NewsHour Extra**

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