

Extra Feature Story

North Korea Prepares for Critical Transfer of Power

The reclusive, communist nation of North Korea is believed to be undergoing a major leadership change, with the longtime dictator Kim Jong-Il preparing his youngest son to take over. The transfer of power is being closely monitored by the rest of the world because North Korea has an erratic, often aggressive government and a powerful military with nuclear weapons capabilities.

The Kim family has ruled North Korea for more than 50 years, ever since the current ruler's father, Kim Il-Sung, took power in 1948. Today, Kim Jong-Il rules over a country whose people often experience extreme poverty and famine (large food shortages) but still generally revere him as their "Dear Leader." Since the 68-year-old "Dear Leader" suffered a stroke two years ago, he has appeared increasingly frail and in need of a successor.

The Kim family has created a "cult of personality" in North Korea by using the media and propaganda to create heroic and idealized images of themselves. It is difficult for outsiders to know exactly what goes on beyond North Korea's tightly guarded borders, but it's clear that many North Koreans have become loyal followers of the Kim family.

According to some reports, many North Koreans believe that Kim Il-Sung created the world and that Kim Jong-Il controls the weather. However, because of their poor living conditions, some people are getting fed up with life under the Kim family and may not accept a new leader as easily.

"(After) years now of famine and deprivation, people, I don't think, believe in (the regime) the same way they did," journalist Barbara Demick told the NewsHour.

A young leader is groomed

The heir apparent to the Kim dynasty, Kim Jong-Un, is believed to be about 27 years old and is the youngest of Kim Jong-Il's three sons. He was educated in Switzerland at a boarding school before returning to North Korea.

Kim Jong-Un had rarely been mentioned to the North Korean people until last week, when the government called a meeting of the Worker's Party to promote him to a higher military rank and presumably prepare him to take over for his father. The Worker's Party is the ruling political party in North Korea and held its last meeting 30 years ago, so its most recent gathering is considered an important occasion.

The Worker's Party has to promote Kim Jong-Un in the military ranks before he can assume his new leadership position because North Korea has a policy called "songun" - military first.

The North Korean military, whose 1.2 million troops make it among the largest in the world, is in charge of the country's politics through a body called the National Defense Commission, which the Kim family heads up.

Power transfers can make governments vulnerable

Transferring power within a government can make the people in charge vulnerable because others might take advantage of the leadership shift to take power for themselves or create instability. Countries that are led by dictators often hand down leadership responsibilities within families to avoid vulnerability and keep power concentrated in the hands of a few.

A similar transition happened in 2008 in Cuba, another communist country, when longtime dictator Fidel Castro ceded power to his brother, Raul. Although the elder Castro is in poor health, reports indicate that he still helps his brother with key decisions and has a role in Cuba's foreign policy. It's expected that Kim Jong-Il would also continue to influence his youngest son's policy decisions during and after the power transfer.

Communism is a form of government originally designed to spread power and wealth among all people. But, so far, the world's communist governments haven't turned out that way: today's five communist countries (North Korea, Cuba, China, Laos and Vietnam) all have governments where leadership power and wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few top officials and figureheads.

What does the future hold for North Korea?

The power transfer in North Korea is being closely monitored because of what regime collapse could mean for the rest of the world. Analysts believe that if North Korea's government breaks down completely, its 23 million people would stream toward the country's borders with China and South Korea. Because so many North Koreans are malnourished and in poor health, such a mass migration would be a major humanitarian crisis.

China in particular has a vested interest in what happens in North Korea because it would bear the brunt of such a refugee crisis. China is also the biggest supplier of food, arms, and fuel to North Korea. Kim Jong-Il has traveled frequently to China in recent months, likely seeking approval for his planned power transfer.

It's too early to tell what will happen when Kim Jong-Il officially transfers power to his son, but it's clear he's taken some precautions to keep power in the family at all costs: when he promoted his son to the rank of "general" in the military, he did the same for his sister and her husband.

- Compiled by Veronica DeVore for NewsHour Extra