

From Hermit Kingdom to Queendom: Kim Jong-un's Daughter and Her Role in North Korean Politics

This article was reviewed by Yaron Lischinsky



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North Korea's successful launch of a Hwasong-17 intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), capable of striking the continental United States, has made headlines all over the world. The reason for this, however, was not the rocket itself. Rather, it was the sight of the country's leader, Kim Jong-un, walking hand in hand with his daughter that caught worldwide attention. Ever since, observers have been discussing the rationale behind introducing the young girl to the public. Some argue that through her display, the regime intends to project an image of humanity and innocence upon itself. Others speculate that she is being positioned as a potential heiress to her father. However, is it really possible to predict whether she will assume the leadership post?

Her public appearances should not be viewed in isolation. Rumours and reports sur-

rounding Kim Jong-un's deteriorating health have evoked a climate of uncertainty about the future of the regime (Shim, 2023). A struggle for power should Kim Jong-un no longer be able to lead the country could have far-reaching implications for security dynamics in Northeast Asia. Yet, considering her age and her lack of political experience, the odds of her being groomed as an imminent successor to her father are rather low. Instead, another, less strict assumption may prove to be stronger in explaining her frequent displays: her public appearances indicate that Kim Jong-un will eventually be succeeded by *someone* from within the Kim family dynasty, regardless of whether it will be his daughter or someone else. Thus, in light of Kim Jong-un's reportedly poor state of health, his daughter's frequent showcases first and foremost serve as strategic manoeuvres intended to signal the regime's durability.



Figure 1: Korean Central News Agency/Korea News Service via AP

In order to explain this theory, this text will first introduce the benefits of hereditary succession, considering that this is the mechanism that regulates leadership transition in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). It will then examine the domestic political environment in North Korea to prove that the signal Kim tries to send is indeed credible. Although dominated by men, the number of women in North Korean domestic politics has risen steadily ever since Kim Jong-un took the country's helm. If this trend persists, it could ultimately pave the way for a female leader. This text will conclude by drawing out Kim Jong-il's rise to power to identify patterns that may help assess the prospects of Kim Jong-un's daughter being groomed as the DPRK's next leader.

Why Autocratic Regimes Like Hereditary Succession

The majority of experts agree that North Korea practises hereditary succession, where power solely lies in the hands of the Kim dynasty (Jo, 1986; Park, 2011; Zhe, 2015). The country's constitution declares the DPRK the "State of Juche," which applies the ideas of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il (*Socialist Constitution of The Democratic People's Republic of Korea, 2020*, p. 1). The "Ten Principles for the Establishment of a Monolithic Ideological System", arguably of higher significance than the constitution, moreover herald the first two leaders as the "Sun of Juche" (Dowling & Hong, 2021) and demand unconditional obedience to them. Finally, all three leaders so far have been members of the Kim family.

Hereditary succession offers several advantages for autocratic regimes. First, it provides clear rules for the process of power transition. If leadership succession is disputed, instability arises, and elites may be incentivised to carry

out a coup. By regulating succession, dictators prevent the emergence of a power vacuum that could destabilise their rule (Brownlee, 2007; Herz, 1952; Kokkonen & Sundell, 2014; Svoblik, 2012; Tullock, 1987). The void left behind by Mao Zedong's death in 1976 illustrates that unregulated succession can pose a significant threat. Initially, Mao sought to balance competing factions within the Communist Party to consolidate his leadership. After his passing, however, a power struggle between the different factions ensued, resulting in political turmoil and instability (Dittmer, 1994). Establishing clear principles guiding the transfer of power may have prevented such a threat. Kokkonen and Sundell (2014) further suggest that autocratic rulers in mediaeval Europe were less likely to be deposed if they practised hereditary succession. That is, because primogeniture, i.e. the transfer of governing authority to the first-born child, signals the longevity of the regime, thus vetting the ruler against internal threats (Kokkonen & Sundell, 2020).

Second, by nature of their position, designated successors accrue power, which may incentivise them to accelerate the power transition process by mounting a coup against the incumbent leader. This is generally referred to as the "crown prince problem" (Herz, 1952). However, if the designated successor is an offspring of the incumbent leader, they may be more loyal to their parent and thereby less inclined to forcibly seize power. Against this backdrop, Brownlee (2007) argues that hereditary succession makes for a viable solution to the crown prince problem since the threat of regime overthrow orchestrated by descendants of the incumbent leader is lower.

Third, hereditary succession incentivises elites to maintain support for the leadership by rendering political dynamics an iterated game.

Elites receive their positions and privileges as a result of the current distribution of power. In order to safeguard these in the long term, they have to preserve existing power structures. In other words, elites who wish to remain part of the elite have strong incentives to maintain support for the incumbent leadership. If a regime can demonstrate a long-term perspective, there is little rationale for withdrawing support. Hereditary succession serves as a means for autocratic rulers to demonstrate such a long-term perspective, as it acts as a signal of the regime's longevity and stability (Kurrild-Klitgaard, 2000; Park, 2011).

In light of his poor health condition, Kim Jong-un may seek to communicate the longevity of his regime even beyond his rule. Under these circumstances, hereditary succession is an attractive tool as it discourages internal power struggles and signals the continuity of benefit distribution. This way, it may help stabilise his rule and ensure a smooth power of transfer in case this is necessitated by his health situation.

The Kim Dynasty: Ever since the Korean War, control over the Northern part of the Korean peninsula was kept in the hands of the Kim family. From the DPRK's founding father Kim Il-sung and his son Kim Jong-il to Kim Jong-un's present leadership, their legacy is interwoven with the country's complex history and its role in global politics.

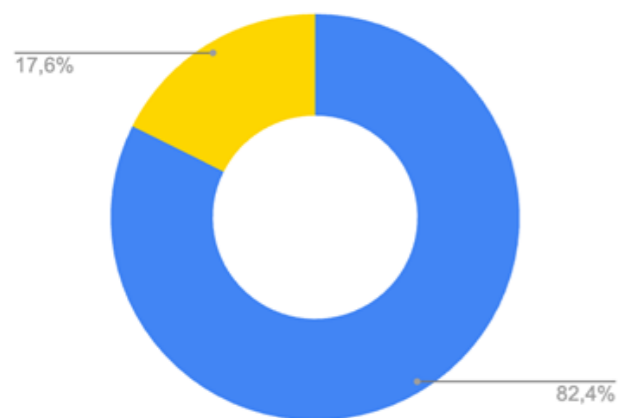
Women on the Rise in North Korean Politics

Yet, it may seem unrealistic at first glance that a woman could ultimately emerge as the beneficiary of such a power transfer. North

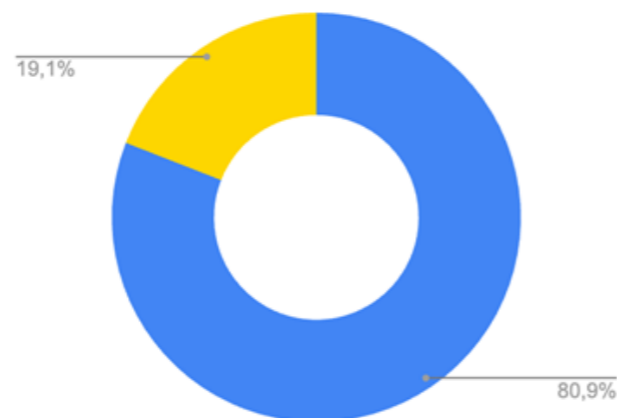
Korea's society is traditionally extremely patriarchal. Gender roles are clearly distributed, and politics is considered a male domain. "남존여비" (namjon yeobi) is a traditional Confucian term that connotes conventional gender roles and attitudes. Translating to "male superiority and female inferiority," it promotes strict hierarchical relationships as well as the subordination of women to men. Considering the historical prevalence of this concept in North Korean society, the only woman to attain a somewhat powerful position until Kim Jong-un assumed leadership was Kim Il-sung's second wife, Kim Song-ae, who became the head of the Woman's Union in 1960 (Lankov, 2023).

Although discrimination against women persists, the situation has changed dramatically since Kim Jong-un assumed leadership. The onset of marketisation significantly elevated the role of women in the country. The state tacitly accepting the presence of these markets further reinforced the new status of women in the DPRK (Charley, 2023; Cho et al., 2020; Park, 2012). In the 2019 Supreme People's Assembly elections, nearly one in five politicians elected was female. Remarkably, as portrayed in Figure 2, the percentage of women in North Korea's Supreme People's Assembly is substantially higher than that of Japan and undercuts the share of women in South Korea's parliament by merely 1.5 % (Inter-Parliamentary Union, n.d.). Additionally, there has been a notable increase in the number of women holding senior government positions in recent years. Kim Yo-jong, the sister of Kim Jong-un, has emerged as a prominent figure and is believed to currently hold the position of First Deputy Director of the Workers' Party's Propaganda and Agitation Department. She is widely regarded as a close advisor to her

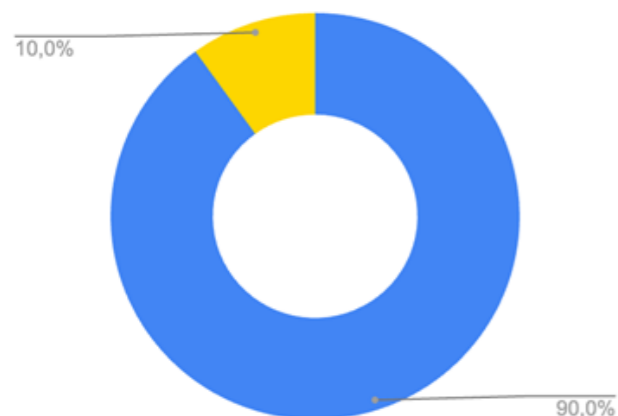
North Korea



South Korea



Japan



Germany

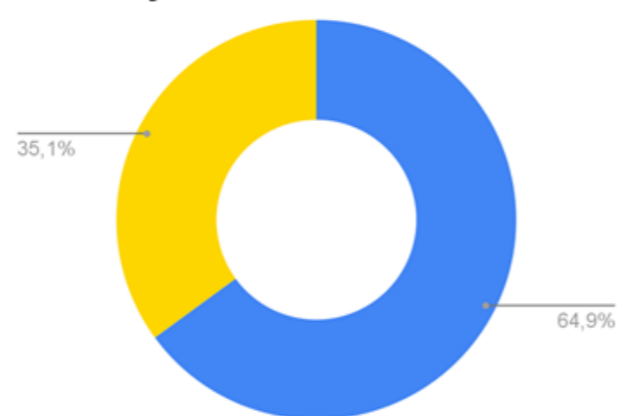


Figure 2: Share of women in international parliaments

brother. Other notable female figures in the DPRK's government include Choe Son-hui, who acted as an important negotiator in denuclearisation talks with the United States and was appointed as foreign minister in 2022, and Hyon Song-wol, former leader of the agitprop band Morangbong, now in a leading position in the ruling party's Propaganda and Agitation Department (Noh, 2020).

The appointments of women to senior positions indicate a paradigm shift in North Korea's traditionally male-dominated political landscape. This could have profound implications for the future of the leader's daughter: Although powerful women remain a rare sight in the upper tiers of the government apparatus, recent developments have provided increased legitimacy for women who aspire to assume positions of power. This not only benefits regime

stability but could ultimately also enable a female leader. On a side note: albeit rare, women in power are not entirely unheard of in other socialist regimes. In Vietnam, for example, Nguyễn Thị Kim Ngân has previously served as Chair of the National Assembly, a position considered one of the four pillars of leadership. And in the incumbent Politburo of the Communist Party, Trương Thị Mai serves as a permanent member of the Secretariat.

A potential obstacle to the rise of women may be the dominance of hardliners in North Korean domestic politics, a faction almost exclusively composed of men (Park, 2011; Schäfer, 2021). The country's patriarchal structure perpetuates traditional gender roles that may hinder women from ascending to positions of power. With respect to this, it is notable that most public appearances of Kim Jong-un's daughter so far

have taken place in a military context, a domain of the hardline faction. The young girl has prominently accompanied her father to multiple ICBM launches, attended a military parade, and joined a banquet with military officials. The stamps she is featured on moreover depict her in front of a mobile missile launcher and showcase her together with high-ranking military members (North Korea Leadership Watch, n.d.; Harrison et al., 2023; Reddy, 2023). Her appearances may thus serve as a means to introduce her to the military elite of the country and to improve their acceptance of a powerful female figure.

Inspiration from Textbook Power Transition

The fate of Kim Jong-un's older brother, Kim Jong-nam, opens another avenue of explanation for the repeated public appearances of the current leader's daughter. Being the oldest son of former ruler Kim Jong-il, it was originally him who was poised to be the country's next leader, but he fell out of his father's favour after getting caught with a forged passport when he tried to visit Disneyland in Tokyo in 2001. The fallout was perhaps inevitable as, according to personal statements, Kim Jong-nam advocated reforms and market-opening in the DPRK, which led to his father labelling him a capitalist. He was eventually exiled and continued to publicly criticise the regime, in particular its dynastic succession system ("Kim Jong-Nam Says N. Korean Regime Won't Last Long," 2012).

Kim Jong-un may try to prevent his daughter from following a similar path. Having attended schools in Russia and Switzerland, young Kim Jong-nam enjoyed freedoms absent in the DPRK. Pyongyang was far away, control was lax, and content that may be perceived as malicious by the leadership was readily available.

These factors may have contributed to his growing criticism of his father's regime. The proximity between Kim Jong-un's daughter and the strong military faction of the leadership stands in stark contrast to Kim Jong-nam's childhood. Raising her in the heart of the state's power and accompanying her father to important events helps prevent alienation from the regime and establishes a bond between her and the country's ruling class. This makes her more susceptible to a favourable view of the regime in the future.

It additionally increases the cost for her to oppose the regime. The personal relationships she may develop with powerful members of the country's elite will make her more reluctant to remove these people from their positions in case she attains a government post in the future. In contrast, Kim Jong-nam would possibly have had fewer qualms about dramatically changing the elite's composition, since he grew up in isolation from the ruling class and thus lacked close ties with its members. Finally, experiencing the regime's power dynamics may increase the young girl's understanding of who holds influence and who might resist attempts at reform. This decreases the risk of conflict in the future. Raising her in Pyongyang and showcasing her to the public is therefore a rational choice for the North Korean regime.

Combining these three perspectives yields a more comprehensive view of why the regime may showcase Kim Jong-un's daughter. Considering the poor state of Kim Jong-un's health situation, he is well advised to communicate to the elite that the regime remains stable. The image of stability that he constructs thus rests on three pillars. First, hereditary succession establishes clear rules of succession and signals continuity, and by presenting a possible heiress, he implies that rule will be passed down to the

dynasty's next generation in the upcoming instance of power transition. Second, an increasing number of women in powerful positions may pave the way for a female leader in the future. Third, by raising his daughter in Pyongyang, Kim Jong-un ensures that she develops a set of values in line with those of the DPRK. The exact extent of the current leader's health problems remains unknown, but the repeated appearances of his daughter and the implications associated with them indicate that a collapse of the regime is far from imminent.

How to find out who will become the DPRK's Next Leader

The question that remains to be answered is whether Kim Jong-un is grooming his daughter as the next leader of the DPRK. While this is not the main subject of this paper, several indicators may hint at the role the leader's daughter will assume in the future. These range from more favourable conditions for women in senior government positions in the DPRK to clues that may be drawn from the build-up process Kim Jong-il went through.

First, should the reign of the country be passed on, it is unlikely that power will be retained in the 3rd generation of the Kim dynasty. Kim Jong-un's brothers are dead or considered unsuitable for a leadership position, and it might yet be one generation too early to install a female leader ("Kim Jong-Nam Says N. Korean Regime Won't Last Long," 2012). On top of that, autocratic leaders nonetheless prefer to be succeeded by a descendant rather than a sibling, irrespective of the circumstances. Grooming a sibling gives rise to a powerful antagonist who may pose a threat to the incumbent leader in the build-up phase. Being part of

the same generation, the incumbent leader and a sibling successor recruit members of the same elite for their power bases, which may ultimately result in a struggle for power prior to the incumbent's passing. In order to solve this problem and ensure the stability of their rule, authoritarian leaders typically prefer to pass the reins of power down to a descendant (Kokkonen & Sundell, 2014).

A second factor supporting the view that Kim Jong-un's daughter is being groomed as a future leader is the fact that the political environment and recent developments no longer exclude women from politics. The increased presence of women in important positions, coupled with the observation that the girl's public appearances have so far predominantly taken place in male-dominated settings, implies that Kim Jong-un tries to create an environment that is more conducive to women in upper government positions. In summary, if the DPRK keeps following this trajectory, a female leader could be within the realm of possibility in the future.

In order to understand political manoeuvres involving Kim Jong-un's daughter and how they might be related to the question of succession, observers may draw lessons from the power transfer process from Kim Il-sung to Kim Jong-il. The power transition process administered by Kim Il-sung took 26 years, which allowed for thoroughly planning the rise of young Kim Jong-il and the eventual transfer of power. Kim Jong-un's ascendancy to power, on the other hand, proceeded much quicker. It only became apparent in 2010 that he was groomed as the regime's next leader, and his father's passing merely one year later possibly opened up the avenue to the country's leadership post quicker than he had anticipated (Frank, 2012). This means that Kim Jong-un had significantly less time to consolidate his power, which in

turn could potentially have posed a threat to the country's stability. Considering that North Korea's society remains strongly patriarchal, granting her a longer period of time to establish ties with powerful figures and build up a support base may be regarded as an investment in the regime's long-term stability, in case the young girl eventually ascends to the country's top post.

When Kim Il-sung passed power on to his son, he undertook several measures that tremendously supported Kim Jong-il's reign: among other factors, he centralised power, developed a personality cult centred on himself, and built up a loyal elite. These elements remain vital in contemporary North Korean politics. The state is still centred on the Kim family, and foundational documents could be adjusted in the future to include a fourth-generation Kim dynasty leader.

This, however, will likely only happen once a future leader is officially appointed. Until then, propaganda may most reliably indicate the significance of the incumbent leader's daughter. As her name has not yet been publicly announced, she is mostly described through honorary titles. Such titles could hint at her standing within the regime and thereby provide clues about the path she takes. Given the power the military holds in the DPRK and considering that military backing will be crucial for a future 4th generation leader, mil-

itary titles will be particularly significant.

Crucial will also be the posts to which she or another possible successor will be assigned. During his rise to power, Kim Jong-il held multiple positions in the party and the military. He served as Supreme Commander of the Korean People's Army, as the Director of the Propaganda Bureau, and joined the Workers' Party's Political Commission, before becoming a member of the Politburo (Lim, 2012). He was additionally conferred honorary titles such as "party centre" and "beloved leader comrade", and saw his birthday designated a public holiday on his ascendancy to the helm of the country (Frank & Park, 2012). All in all, Kim Jong-il enjoyed a power incubation period (PIP) of 26 years during which he could consolidate his power and build up a loyal support base. Empirical evidence suggests in this context that re-

gimes with a PIP of more than five years tend to be more stable, and the case of Kim Jong-il is certainly a supporting example. Whether or not the young girl will replicate Kim Jong-il's path remains to be seen, particularly considering that it remains unlikely that a woman will assume a high-level military post. Yet, if one were to assume that Kim Jong-un's daughter will succeed her father in the future, it is not surprising that she appears on the political stage early, as it allows for more time to become familiar with incumbent elites.

Although powerful women remain a rare sight in the upper tiers of the government apparatus, recent developments have provided increased legitimacy for women who aspire to assume positions of power.

Conclusion

Will Kim Jong-un's daughter eventually ascend to power and continue the reign of the Kim dynasty? Or are there motives behind the frequent display of Kim Jong-un's daughter that remain hidden from observers? For now, it remains unclear whether the young girl will eventually rise to the country's leadership. But while it is too early to determine whether she will become the country's next leader, Kim Jong-un's reportedly poor health condition may necessitate political manoeuvres that signal the regime's stability.

In the DPRK, this is first and foremost achieved through the practise of hereditary succession. Maintaining a ruling dynasty provides clear rules of succession and thereby deters power struggles within the leadership. By signalling that there is a potential successor, Kim Jong-un communicates the continuity of the regime and thus the continuity of benefit distribution beyond his lifetime. Yet, given the young age of his daughter, it is impossible to tell for sure whether she will become the country's next leader. Rather, scholars should, for now, apply a less strict assumption: instead of assuming that she will ascend to power, a safer conclusion is to assume that *someone* will become the country's next leader, regardless of whether it will be Kim Jong-un's daughter or another individual. Who will assume power greatly depends on the severity of Kim Jong-un's health problems, and is also

subject to a power struggle that may arise in the event of his passing. However, it is difficult to tell when such a power struggle may break out, who might participate, and whom the different factions may support.

Considering Kim Jong-un's investments in regime stability, theories of a sudden collapse of the Kim regime may be rejected. The young girl's frequent displays indicate that, in fact, quite the opposite is the case: the regime is stable and will persist in the future. This has direct implications for the security environment surrounding North Korea: if there are no fundamental changes in the country's leadership, observers cannot expect fundamental changes in the DPRK's foreign policy. In line with its current military posture, the DPRK will likely maintain its trajectory of deterrence. This is furthermore particularly evident through the frequent connections made between the leader's daughter and the regime's military apparatus, as seen, for example, in the picture of her walking hand in hand with her father in front of an ICBM missile. Plus, after all, such weapon tests send both inward and outward signals that the country can defend itself - which is nothing more than an indication of its resilience, i.e., stability. Whether or not the girl assumes power is unclear, but grooming her is unlikely to be on Kim Jong-un's agenda for now. Showcasing the young girl is thus not about succession; it is about sending a message to the international audience.

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