



A PAPER SERIES

UNDERSTANDING NORTH KOREA

The Kims Aren't Just Looking at Things:

What Leadership Events Can Tell Us About North Korean Politics

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Introduction

The North Korean regime was not supposed to survive a second leader succession. Numerous North Korea observers expected the regime to fail with the accession of the 27-year-old Kim Jong Un.¹ For example, Victor Cha, former Director for Asian Affairs at the National Security Council, wrote in a December 2011 *New York Times* op-ed entitled “China’s Newest Province?” that whether North Korea “comes apart in the next few weeks or over several months, the regime will not be able to hold together after the untimely death of its leader.”² Such expectations were reasonable since very few non-monarchical regimes have pulled off consecutive hereditary successions. Kim Jong Un has therefore defied expectations by not just surviving, but consolidating power.

Despite Kim Jong Un’s relatively young age, succession may, surprisingly, already be a concern again for North Korea. Speculation since April 2020 about Kim’s health has raised questions about the future.³ Even if Kim is unlikely to die or become incapacitated soon, the enormous implications of succession on the regime’s stability mean it is important that we give it due consideration.⁴ Fortunately, events preceding Kim’s succession in 2011 provide useful insights about future potential succession issues in North Korea, and elite politics in North Korea more generally.

So how did the North Korean regime pull off its second leader succession? Hundreds of articles and books explore who Kim Jong Un has purged once in power.⁵ Prominent purges include the July 2012 execution of the powerful military elite, Ri Yong Ho, and the December 2013 execution of Kim’s uncle, Jang Song Thaek.

But to understand how Kim Jong Un has survived and consolidated power, we cannot just examine his actions after December 2011. We must also examine how Kim Jong Il laid the groundwork for his son. Unlike Kim Jong Il who was privately named successor in 1974, Kim Jong Un did not have years to prepare.⁶ His father’s actions were crucial in facilitating his path to power and his ability to strengthen his grip on the regime once in office.

In the years preceding Kim Jong Un’s succession (2008-2011), the Workers’ Party of Korea

¹ For example, Bennett, Bruce W., and Jennifer Lind. 2011. “The Collapse of North Korea: Military Missions and Requirements.” *International Security* 36(2): 84.

² Cha, Victor. 2011. “China’s Newest Province?” *The New York Times*, December 19, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/20/opinion/will-north-korea-become-chinas-newest-province.html>.

³ Choe, Sang-hun. 2020. “Kim Jong-un’s Absence and North Korea’s Silence Keep Rumor Mill Churning.” *The New York Times*, April 26, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/26/world/asia/kim-jong-un-absence-north-korea.html>.

⁴ Fifield, Anna. 2019. *The Great Successor: The Divinely Perfect Destiny of Brilliant Comrade Kim Jong Un*. London, UK: John Murray (Publishers).

⁵ For example, Gause, Ken E. 2015. *North Korean House of Cards: Leadership Dynamics Under Kim Jong Un*. Washington, D.C.: The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea.

⁶ Lim, Jae-cheon. 2009. *Kim Jong Il’s Leadership of North Korea*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

(WPK) grew increasingly prominent and civilians began to dominate key institutions, including militarized organizations like the National Defense Commission.⁷ This was a step-change from the preceding military-first politics (*Sŏn'gunjŏngchi*, 선군정치). However, as is true of autocratic regimes across the world, institutions in North Korea reflect underlying power dynamics between elites.⁸ To understand how Kim Jong Il enabled his son's succession and consolidation, we therefore need to also study how he manipulated intra-elite power relations within the regime.

We address this challenge by analyzing how Kim Jong Il manipulated elites through invitations to public leadership events. Kim Jong Il significantly increased the prominence of civilians within the regime through these events. This facilitated Kim Jong Un's succession by enabling him to implement his preferred policies and preventing the military acting as a veto-player who could act against his wishes or even turn the young leader into their puppet. The final section examines the implications of our findings for contemporary North Korean leadership politics.

The Benefits of Analyzing Public Leadership Events

Whether 'reading the runes,' 'examining tea leaves,' or 'peering through the looking glass,' deciphering North Korean leadership politics has often been thought of as an opaque business. However, there are *some* reliable data that provide insights into how Kim Jong Il manipulated intra-elite power relations. Specifically, we can study North Korean leadership events.⁹ These are public events attended by the dictator and generally one or more elites. They include on-the-spot guidance trips made by Kim Jong Il—at anything from children's parks to shoe factories, or inspections of military units to missile tests—as well as major party, state, and military-related occasions such as Plenary Meetings of the Korean Workers' Party Central Committee or military parades.

We are not the first to examine leadership events to glean insights about North Korean elite politics. Policymakers, scholars, and journalists regularly use these events to infer who is in or out of favor with the leader.¹⁰ To quote Jean Lee, who set up the Associated Press's Pyongyang bureau in 2012, "My North Korean colleagues and I paid very close attention to who was standing where, because proximity to the leader always conveys importance in stature."¹¹

⁷ Haggard, Stephan, Luke Herman, and Jaesung Ryu. 2014. "Political Change in North Korea: Mapping the Succession." *Asian Survey* 54(4): 773-800.

⁸ Pepinsky, Thomas. 2014. "The Institutional Turn in Comparative Authoritarianism." *British Journal of Political Science* 44(3): 631-653.

⁹ These are, of course, not the only useful or reliable data. Qualitative data from high-level defector testimonies can be enormously useful, for instance.

¹⁰ Gause 2015; Haggard et al. 2014.

¹¹ Lee, Jean. 2021. "Cyber Slaves." Episode 6, *The Lazarus Hei\$ts*. BBC World Service, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w13xtvg9>.

However, these data provide more information than this. In North Korea and other autocracies, dictators use invitations to these events to empower certain elites and weaken others. By inviting elites to events, the leader provides select individuals with prestige, influence, and a heightened socio-political status. Accompanying the leader publicly is a privilege, and access confers power. In systems where even for those within the regime identifying power is difficult, the perception of power becomes power. As the historian Dale Herspring wrote about Gorbachev's decision of who to invite to leadership events in the Soviet Union, "symbolic representations of power are very important; such things do not happen by accident."¹²

Sŏn'gun to Succession

The Problem

Kim Jong Il laid the groundwork for his son's succession in a rush. His stroke in August 2008 led him to prepare for succession when he had not done so previously.¹³ However, he could not simply name Kim Jong Un as successor and assume that everything would proceed as planned. At the time, Kim Jong Un was 24 years old with little experience of dealing with the powerful North Korean military, other security services, or Party and state apparatuses in general.

Although we often think of the North Korean regime as being exclusively about the Kim family, there are a significant number of other elites with their own interests. Among these other actors, the most powerful at that time were predominantly within the military. Kim Jong Il presided over a political system where the military had a great deal of power and influence. The military had been an erstwhile supporter of his regime, but they also had the power to interfere with the succession or constrain Kim Jong Un once his father was gone.¹⁴

It might seem far-fetched to claim that Kim Jong Il was concerned about military interference but leader successions in hereditary and non-hereditary dictatorships are often disrupted by the military. In Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe's attempt to hand over power to his wife Grace was interrupted by a military coup,¹⁵ while succession in Bulgaria from Todor Zhivkov to his son Vladimir was curtailed when the long-serving Politburo member Petar Mladenov deposed Zhivkov.¹⁶ Analyzing the possibility of a military interference in North Korea is similar to

¹² Herspring, Dale R. 1987. "Gorbachev and the Soviet Military." *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science* 36(4): 42-53.

¹³ Lim, Jae-cheon. 2012. "North Korea's Hereditary Succession: Comparing Two Key Transitions in the DPRK." *Asian Survey* 52(3): 558.

¹⁴ On the power and influence of the military under Kim Jong Il, see: Gause, Ken. 2005. *North Korean Civil-military Trends: Military-first Politics to a Point*. Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute.

¹⁵ Beardsworth, Nicole, Nic Cheeseman, and Simukai Tinho. 2019. "Zimbabwe: The Coup That Never Was, and the Election That Could Have Been." *African Affairs* 118(472): 580-596.

¹⁶ Brownlee, Jason. 2007. "Hereditary Succession in Modern Autocracies." *World Politics* 59(4): 621.

studying accidental nuclear war; just because something has not happened, it does not mean that it will not occur in future.¹⁷

In North Korea itself, Kim Jong Il purged alleged coup plotters who had studied at the Soviet Frunze Academy in 1992,¹⁸ and he narrowly avoided what he seems to have believed was an assassination attempt in 2004 (although not at the hands of the military).¹⁹ While dictators including the Kims sometimes fabricate coup plots as a pretense for purges, there is also credible evidence of occasional genuine military threats from within the regime against the Kim family. It is therefore highly plausible that Kim Jong Il would have worried about the threat that the military could pose to his succession plans, both before and after he was gone.

The Solution in Theory

To forestall military interference in the succession and enable Kim Jong Un to consolidate power, what could Kim Jong Il do? A natural expectation of any autocrat and especially the leader of North Korea would be for Kim Jong Il to purge threatening elites. Indeed, Kim Il Sung pursued this strategy in the 1970s after he chose Kim Jong Il as the successor. For instance, major military officials including Ri Yong Mu (then-director of the Korean People's Army General Political Bureau) and Chi Pyŏng Hak (then-Deputy Minister of the Korean People's Armed Forces) were removed from office for allegedly opposing measures taken to establish Kim Jong Il's succession.²⁰

However, a purge strategy to enable Kim Jong Un's succession was likely seen as prohibitively risky for Kim Jong Il. His stroke had visibly exhibited his mortality. Observable signals that an autocrat may not be around much longer weaken him. Such signals naturally lead elites within the regime to question where their loyalty will lie once the leader has gone.²¹ Related comparative research shows that dictators are less likely to purge military elites when they are vulnerable due to fear of retaliation.²² Dictators also risk provoking retaliation from the military by using alternative tactics like counterbalancing, where they create new paramilitary forces to protect themselves from coups.²³

¹⁷ Sagan, Scott D. 1993. *The Limits of Safety: Organizations, Accidents, and Nuclear Weapons*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

¹⁸ Lee, Tae-gun. 2003. *Puk'an Kunbunŭn Wae K'udet'arŭl Haji Anna: Kimjŏngil Shidae Sŏn'gunjŏngch'iwa Kunbuŭi Chŏngch'ijŏk Yŏk'al* [Why Don't the North Korea Military Leadership Coup? Kim Jong Il Era Military First Politics and the Political Role of the Military]. P'aju, ROK: Hanul: 175-176.

¹⁹ Tertitskiy, Fyodor. 2019. "The Ryongchon Blast: Why One of North Korea's Worst Disasters Remains a Mystery." *NK News*, January 15, 2019, <https://www.nknews.org/2019/01/the-ryongchon-blast-why-one-of-north-koreas-worst-disasters-remains-a-mystery/>.

²⁰ Lee 2003: 68-69.

²¹ Bueno de Mesquita, Bruno, and Alastair Smith. 2017. "Political Succession: A Model of Coups, Revolution, Purges, and Everyday Politics." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 61(4): 707-743.

²² Sudduth, Jun Koga. 2017. "The Strategic Logic of Elite Purges in Dictatorships." *Comparative Political Studies* 50(13): 1768-1801.

²³ De Bruin, Erica. 2020. *How to Prevent Coups d'état*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Instead, Kim Jong Il pursued a subtler strategy. He did not purge military elites, but instead he integrated more civilian elites into his ruling group and raised them up in prominence. These prominent civilian elites were empowered to help Kim Jong Un implement his preferred policies once he had taken power. Further, empowering these civilian elites and Kim Jong Un correspondingly reduced the chances of the military: 1) acting as a veto-player who would block the leader's preferred policies, or 2) even attempting to turn the leader into their puppet. Overall, Kim Jong Il's civilianization of the ruling group as he prepared for succession was aimed at empowering Kim Jong Un once he had taken power.

The Solution in Practice

Under Kim Il Sung, North Korea was an orthodox Stalinist state. The secretariat of the WPK was responsible for high-level policy alongside the Central Committee, and the state was responsible for policy implementation and day-to-day management.²⁴ The military was nominally well-represented in the upper echelons of power. Over 20% of Politburo members were from the Korean People's Army (KPA) from 1966-1985, and more than 10% were military figures for most years leading to Kim Il Sung's death in 1994. But military leaders became gradually less numerous at major public anniversaries during the Kim Il Sung period.²⁵

After Kim Il Sung died, the KPA rose to prominence while the outward face of the WPK largely withered. The official, public facing institutions of the Party, namely the Central Committee and Politburo, both ceased to meet after 1993, only reconvening in 2010, and no Party Congresses were held between the Sixth in 1980 and Kim Jong Il's death in 2011.²⁶ Conversely, following Kim Il Sung's death, military leaders became more numerous at major events,²⁷ and a large percentage of leadership events were military-related. This military-centered form of rule was codified through the centering of the National Defense Commission as the supreme organ of the state in the amendments to the North Korean constitution in 1998, and before that, in the declaration of 'Military First Politics' (*Sŏn'gunjŏngch'i*, 선군정치) and the 'Military First Idea' (*Sŏn'gunsasang*, 선군사상) as being the ideological bases for policies pursued by the regime.²⁸

Military first politics did not mean that the military was placed in charge of the country, but Kim Jong Il did increasingly 'militarize' the top elites surrounding him. Figure 1 shows the number of leadership events between 1994 and 2011, divided by whether they were military or

²⁴ Cheong, Seong-chang. 2011. *Hyŏndaebuk'anŭi Chŏngch'i: Yŏksat'pshinyŏmt'pkwŏllyŏkch'yegye* [The Contemporary North Korean Politics: History, Ideology and Power System]. P'aju, ROK: Hanul: 71-119 and 301-305.

²⁵ Lee 2003.

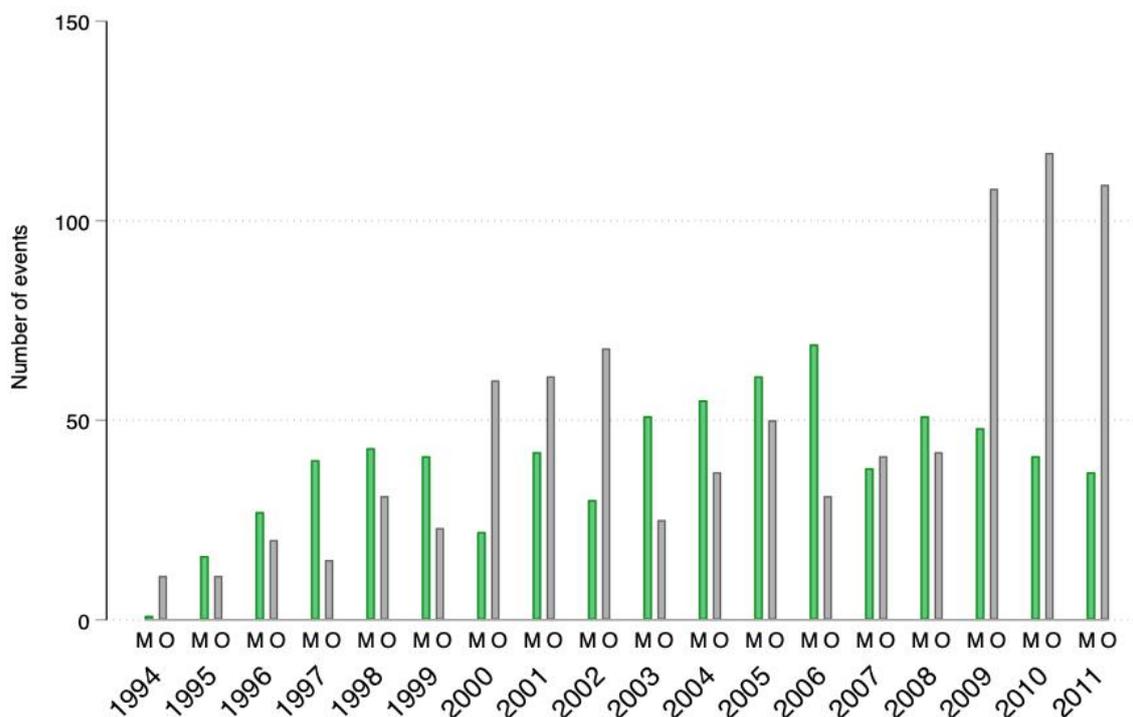
²⁶ This appears to have reflected Kim Jong Il's distaste for official Party meetings, unlike his father. Cheong Seong Chang points out that Kim Jong Il continued to hold regular meetings with cadres from the Central Committee (CC), and the CC's departments were central in many policy discussions even if the CC did not formally convoke during the period. See Cheong 2011: 263-264.

²⁷ Lee 2003: 197.

²⁸ Cheong 2011: 126-134.

other types of events. Figure 1 shows that for most years up to the end of 2008, a large number of events that Kim attended were military in nature, and for several years (1996-1999 and 2003-2006) military events exceeded the total of all other types of events combined (arts, diplomatic, economic, political, and other).²⁹

Figure 1: Total Number of Military and Other Leadership Events, 1994-2011



Until his health began to deteriorate, Kim, unlike his father, had no immediate plans for succession. Kim reportedly said in 2006 after the country’s first nuclear test that he planned to rule into his eighties or nineties (he was 65 at the time).³⁰

In August 2008, however, Kim Jong Il had a stroke, setting in motion a campaign that saw Kim Jong Un emerge as his successor. While orchestrating his son’s succession, Kim Jong Il appears to have decided to rehabilitate the role of the central Party in North Korean political life and deemphasize the power of the military. This process culminated in Kim Jong Un being

²⁹ Data come from NK Pro. Other analyses point to a majority of events being military over this period. See: Cheong 2011: 127.

³⁰ The quote was carried by the Japanese newspaper, *Mainichi Shimbun*, and was widely reported in South Korea. For example, Kang, Yöng-su. 2007. “Kimjöngil “80,90Sekkaji Ch’oegojidoja Hal Köt” Tthugyeja Nonüi Kümgi-si” [Kim Jong Il says “I will be supreme leader until I am 80 or 90”...Talk of succession appears taboo]. *Chosun Ilbo*, January 7, 2007, https://www.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2007/01/04/2007010401012.html.

officially named successor and Kim Jong Il's number two at the Third WPK Party Conference in 2010, which also elected a new WPK Central Committee for the first time in 16 years.³¹

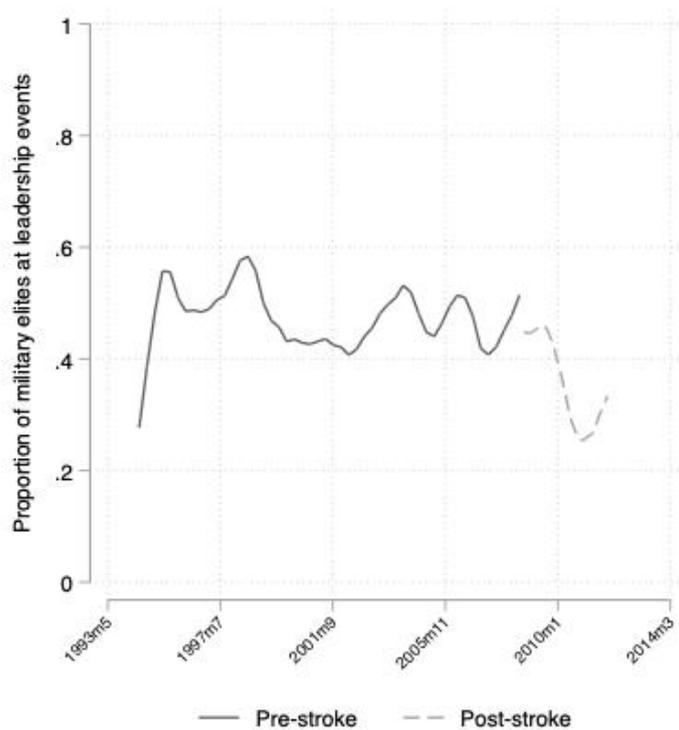
But the initial moves to empower civilian institutions began with Kim Jong Il's decision to strategically alter the size and composition of the elite that surrounded him. This is suggested by Figure 1, which shows non-military events suddenly far exceeded military events after 2008. More direct evidence is shown in Figure 2, which displays the proportion of military and civilian elites at leadership events before and after Kim Jong Il's stroke. The North Korean elite around Kim was highly militarized until just before his stroke. Elites drawn from the military comprised on average nearly half—a remarkable 47%—of all attendees at leadership events from July 1994 until Kim's stroke. This was a large overrepresentation of military elites within North Korea; while North Korea is a heavily militarized society with over 5% of its population under arms,³² most positions of power within the Party-state are not within the military hierarchy.³³ The fact that almost half the attendees at Kim Jong Il's leadership events before his stroke were active military implies a massive overrepresentation of the military elite in public life. Then, following Kim's stroke, this number fell by almost half with on average only 26.5% of attendees at leadership events coming from the military.

Figure 2: Proportion of Military Elites at Leadership Events, July 1994-December 2011

³¹ Cheong 2011: 254; Gause 2015: 141.

³² Republic of Korea Ministry of Defense. 2020. *2020nyŏn Kukpangbaeksŏ* [2020 National Defense White Paper]. Seoul, ROK: Republic of Korea Government: 290.

³³ Republic of Korea Ministry of Unification. Released annually. *Puk'an Kigwanbyŏl Inmyŏngnok* [North Korea Index of Names by Institution]. Seoul, ROK: Ministry of Unification.



The cause of this was not Kim suddenly declining to invite military officials to leadership events. Instead, Kim dramatically increased the number of civilian elites who attended leadership events to boost their standing and power within the elite. As Figure 3 shows, the average number of elites who attended public events before Kim’s stroke was 4.29, but it jumped to 7.06 following his stroke. To reiterate, these changes were driven by a stark increase in the number of civilians invited to events. On average, 2.28 civilians attended a leadership event before Kim’s stroke, but 5.27 did afterwards. For military elites, there was only a slight decline with an average of 2.01 and 1.80 elites attending events before and after Kim’s stroke, respectively.

Figure 3: Average Number of Elites at Leadership Events, July 1994-December 2011

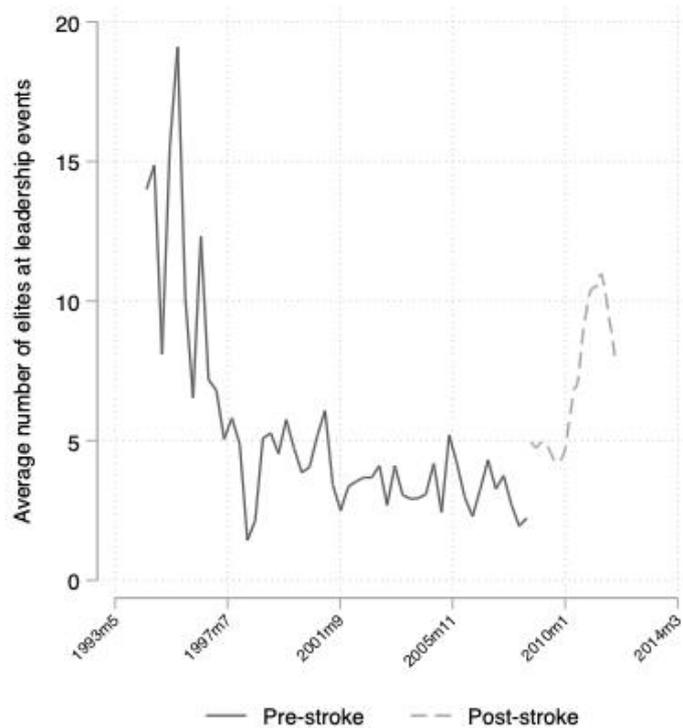
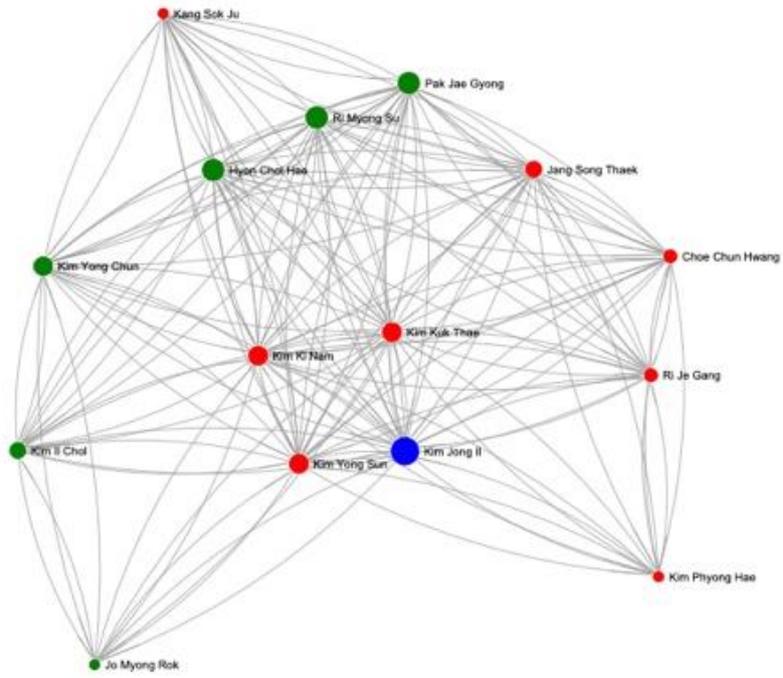


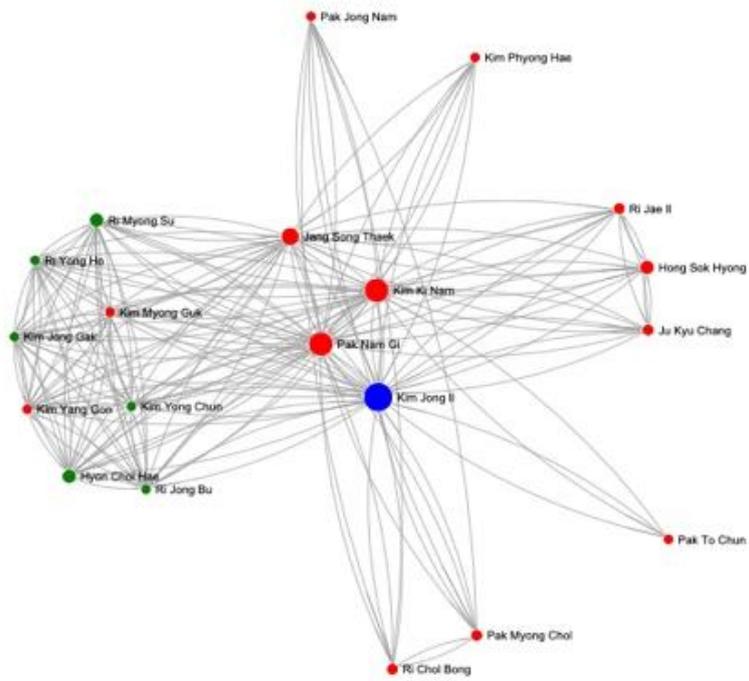
Figure 4 provides an illustrative visualization of these networks around Kim before and after his stroke, based on February 2003 and February 2009. The dots (nodes) indicate the number of events that elites attended, while green nodes capture military elites and red nodes are civilians. Panel A illustrates the outsized power that military elites had from their access to the Supreme Leader before the stroke, while Panel B shows how Kim later sought to curtail the power of military elites by increasing the size of his entourage via increasing the number of civilians in attendance at leadership events.

Figure 4: Networks of Elites at Leadership Events

Panel A: February 2003



Panel B: February 2009



Who were the civilians that Kim Jong Il relied on to prepare for succession? Most prominent in Kim Jong Il's post-stroke inner circle were his sister Kim Kyong Hee and her husband Jang Song Thaek. Jang had been noted as a powerbroker in Pyongyang since at least the early 1990s, though he was purged on multiple occasions.³⁴ They were accompanied by familiar faces, most prominently Kim Ki Nam (b. 1935), long-serving Party Secretary for Agitation and Propaganda (1992-2017) and military men Hyon Chol Hae (b. 1934) and Ri Myong Su (b. 1934)—though both were far less prominent than they had been before Kim Jong Il's stroke.

Alongside such familiar faces were civilian elites who suddenly saw their standing dramatically rise. Among them were Mun Kyong Dok (b. 1957), a Party official who had never been a named attendee at a public event involving Kim Jong Il prior to Kim's stroke. Mun rapidly rose to become Party Chair of Pyongyang in 2010 and a Secretary in the Central Committee (CC) Secretariat (the Party leadership's core administrative staff), as well as a candidate member of the Politburo (the KWP's top decision-making body) in the same year. Another was Thae Jong Su (b. 1936), a former factory manager and Vice Premier who had previously only once appeared alongside Kim Jong Il, and would then be handed the South Hamgyong Party Secretaryship in 2009 before being appointed to the CC Secretariat in 2010. Similarly, if somewhat less dramatically, Pak To Chun (b. 1944) only appeared alongside Kim on 11 occasions before the stroke, but some 120 times thereafter. Appointed Party Secretary for Chagang Province in 2005, Pak was promoted to the CC Secretariat in 2010, and he went from what appears to have been a relatively successful career as a senior regional official to the heights of power in Kim's elite inner circle.

In addition to such dramatic examples, other less central civilian elites also saw their standing increase as they were called upon to appear alongside Kim Jong Il far more often than they had been previously. Examples include Ju Kyu Chang (b. 1928), the First Deputy Director of the Party's Military Industry Department, who appeared alongside Kim more than four times as often as he once did, and Kim Yang Gon (b. 1942), Party Secretary for International Affairs (1997-2007) and then Party Secretary for the United Front Department (2007-2015). Both were already senior officials when Kim suffered his stroke, but both became far more prominent afterward.

The career trajectories of these officials are examples of civilian officials whose status rose dramatically as Kim Jong Il cultivated a set of loyal officials who could help Kim Jong Un govern effectively and consolidate power once in office. These actions presaged a repositioning of power in Pyongyang away from military institutions and elites towards a more civilianized order.

³⁴ Yonhap News. 1991. Koyŏnghwan--oehwabŏri [Ko Young-hwan -- Foreign Currency Earning]. *Yonhap News*, November 16, 1991, <https://news.naver.com/main/read.naver?mode=LSD&mid=sec&sid1=001&oid=001&aid=0003557179>.

Policy Implications

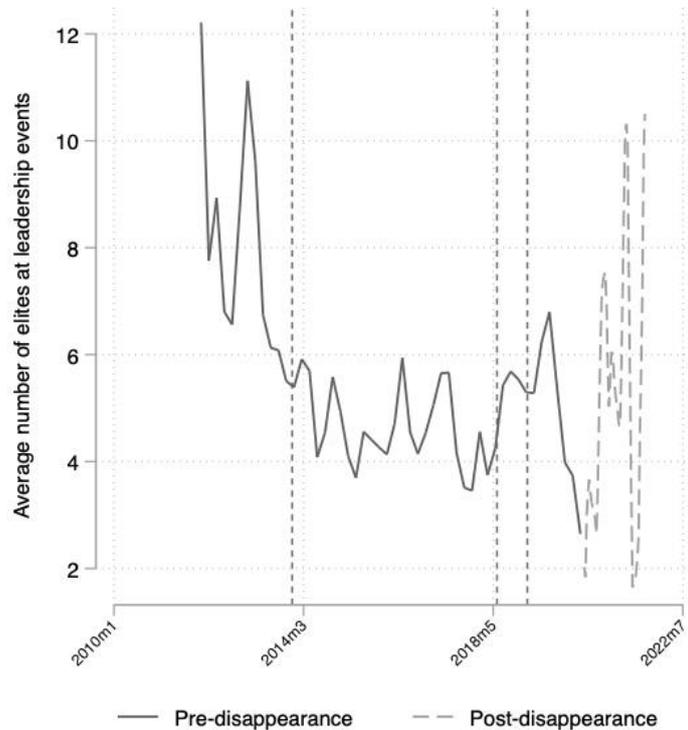
Analysis of Kim Jong Il's preparations for succession raises implications for interpretation of more recent North Korean leadership politics, in part related to questions about future succession. The nature of the Kim regime means that information is scarce, and what little there is often arrives late. However, lessons from this analysis can enhance our understanding of certain contemporaneous political events in North Korea.

One of the key findings from our paper is that Kim Jong Il seems to have expanded the size of his inner circle when he felt the situation among the ruling elite in North Korea was potentially more unstable. This behavior is not unique to Kim Jong Il or even North Korea; dictators in other contexts use similar elite management techniques at times of vulnerability.³⁵ Is it possible to suppose Kim Jong Un behaves similarly? Below, we analyze changes in the size of Kim Jong Un's inner circle using data on leadership events from September 2011 to December 2021. If the assumption that Kim Jong Un increases the size of his inner circle at times of uncertainty holds, we may be able to identify periods when Kim Jong Un has felt less secure in his hold over the regime.

Figure 5 shows the average number of elites who attended public leadership events under Kim Jong Un. Similar to Kim Jong Il, a relatively high number of elites attended events in Kim Jong Un's early years. However, this sharply decreased in 2013 before rebounding somewhat in subsequent years.

³⁵ Woldense, Josef. 2021. "What Happens When Coups Fail? The Problem of Identifying and Weakening the Enemy Within." *Comparative Political Studies*. Forthcoming.

Figure 5: Average Number of Elites at Leadership Events, December 2011-September 2021



The sudden fall in the number of elites who attended events in mid-2013 corresponds with one of the biggest events of the Kim Jong Un era: the execution of his uncle, Jang Song Thaek, signified in Figure 5 by the leftmost vertical dotted line. When Jang was executed, North Korea observers were initially divided on how to interpret this event of seismic proportions. Some suggested it was a sign of instability as rival groups fought over power,³⁶ while others argued that Kim Jong Un had signaled his strength by taking out such a powerful elite,³⁷ a view that has gained greater traction in recent years. To quote Victor Cha again, “[e]very time we hear rumors of more executions, we have to wonder whether it’s a sign of authority or an inability to keep things under control.”³⁸

Correspondingly, the sharp decrease in the number of elites who attended leadership events in mid-2013—around six months before Jang’s execution—is consistent with Ken Gause’s

³⁶ Branigan, Tania. 2013. “Execution of Kim Jong-un’s Uncle Raises Fears of Instability in North Korea.” *The Guardian*, December 13, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/13/execution-kim-jong-un-uncle-instability-north-korea>.

³⁷ Nuclear Threat Initiative. 2013. “Kim Jong Un Seen Trying to Signal Strength After Uncle’s Execution.” *Nuclear Threat Initiative*, December 16, 2013, <https://www.nti.org/gsn/article/kim-jong-un-seen-trying-project-aura-strength-after-uncles-execution/>.

³⁸ Mundy, Simon, and Tae-jun Kang. 2015. “North Korea Executes Defence Minister: Intelligence Reports.” *Financial Times*, May 14, 2015.

argument that Jang's arrest in the middle of a Politburo meeting was the culmination of a longer, drawn-out process of Jang's purge that officially commenced in May 2013.³⁹ The change in the size of Kim's inner circle is consistent with this story; specifically, that after purging the powerful general Ri Yong Ho in July 2012 and starting to move against Jang in early/mid 2013, Kim felt sufficiently secure to reduce the size of his inner circle and govern in a more exclusive manner.

This bolsters the interpretation of North Korean leaders increasing/decreasing the size of their inner circle when they feel more/less vulnerable, which raises the question of how we might re-interpret more recent events. The dotted lines on the right of Figure 5 mark the Singapore and Hanoi summits in June 2018 and February 2019 respectively. Traveling abroad is risky for dictators as the symbolism of leaving the country risks heightening its vulnerability, while the summits with the United States also represented a significant step change for North Korean foreign policy, which could have riled the KPA leadership. Leadership event data suggest that Kim Jong Un may have shared these concerns as Figure 5 shows that he increased the size of the ruling coalition in advance of both summits.

More recently, analysts have fiercely debated whether Kim Jong Un's disappearance for almost three weeks from April 11 to May 1, 2020 signaled a health scare for Kim, or if it was simply incidental. While there is risk in extrapolating from Figure 5 as the trends in the data do vary, we do note an overall slight upward trend after Kim's reappearance at a fertilizer factory in May 2020. If Kim Jong Un does increase the size of his inner circle when he feels more vulnerable, then it appears that this was the case following his disappearance in April 2020. Of course, these are tentative conclusions, and should be treated as such. The size of Kim Jong Un's coterie, just like that of his father, will have been driven by a range of factors, including the current policy issues, event planning, and other factors.

That said, our argument and data also have potentially interesting implications for those looking to negotiate with North Korea. The prominence of individual diplomats at public events may correspond to them having the favor, trust, and authority of the leader when conducting negotiations. Hence, diplomats consistently prominent at leadership events would appear to make for the most fruitful counterparts in negotiations.

Overall, our paper shows the insights that can be gained into contemporary North Korean leadership politics from identifying systematic patterns in historical events. In ongoing research, we are exploring additional insights from these data on leadership events under Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un, including based on more detailed biographical data.

³⁹ Gause 2015: 57-58.

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Cover Image: View of Pyongyang from North Korea's capital.
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