



# The North Korean Coronation Process: Who Will Become Regent After Kim Jong-un?

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Kim Jong-un's health problems and their implications for the continuity of the Kim family's dynastic regime are critical issues for the North Korean dictatorship, which must prepare the next generation to rule the state. The question is, who will become the next leader if Kim Jong-un dies - his daughter or his sister?

In a dictatorship, the matter of succession is always very delicate. The deepest fear of any dictator is being overthrown, either by internal forces (competitive political elements within the state, such as military or party figures) or external forces that want to force regime change.

Leadership changes in dictatorships often include a purging of the group surrounding the leader through either exile or execution, depending on the regime's particular *modus operandi*. Dictators tend to nominate only their most trusted advisors to the most critical official positions, and these supposedly loyal people are often members of the leader's immediate family.

Bashar al-Assad, Saddam Hussein, Kim Jong-un, and other dictators are all examples of leaders who installed close family members in important positions in their regimes. With that said, Kim Jong-un has demonstrated over the years that being a near relation does not immunize a person from execution if he or she is

thought to pose a threat to the head of the state (Kim Jong-un had both his elder brother, Kim Jong-nam, and his uncle, Jang Song-thaek, assassinated).

A few years ago, Kim Jong-un began to place his sister Kim Yo-jong in positions in state organs. In so doing, he began the process of legitimizing her in Pyongyang's inner circles as well as among its allies and its adversaries. Kim Yo-jong became the face of North Korean foreign and security issues, mainly in Seoul and Washington.

In 2023, Kim Jong-un began to expose his daughter, Kim Ju-ae, to the public as a potential successor despite her youth (she is believed to be 12 years old). The elevation of his sister and presentation of his daughter demonstrate Kim Jong-un's intention to prepare the next generation for rule, as Kim Il-sung did with Kim Jong-il.

The health of the leader is a state secret in any dictatorship, and information leaks on the subject are strictly prohibited. This reflects a fear of attempts by internal or external forces to evict a leader who is known to be unhealthy and therefore less able to protect his leadership. Kim Jong-il suffered ill health during his rule, and it became a threat to the regime's stability. State media manipulated reports to show him as alive and leading the state, even when he was in poor health. State media similarly manipulated reports about Kim Jong-un's health during the COVID crisis, when he went for long periods without being seen in public.

The death of the leader can also be a security issue in any dictatorship, and the deaths of Kim Il-sung (1994) and Kim Jong-il (2011) were viewed as such by the North Korean regime. In both cases, fear that internal or external forces might try to seize power caused the regime to postpone announcing the death for almost two days. During that time, the transition of the leadership was secured.

Kim Jong-un's health, the stability of the regime, and the need to ensure that no one threatens the continuity of Kim's family in the leadership of the state have led him to begin to prepare his heir. Daughter Kim Ju-ae might become the heir in the future, but she is too young to lead the state if her father dies any time soon. That is why he nominated sister Kim Yo-jong to assist him in the running of the state. If he passes away, she will become regent until Kim Ju-ae is old enough to rule.

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