
North Korea: the alleged death of a leader and the thorny "transition"



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The state of health and living condition of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un is a growing mystery. All sorts of news have been circulating in the last 15 days, ranging from rumours suggesting that he is either already dead or in a 'vegetative state' as a result of the complicated placement of a coronary stent, to claims that he is alive and well on the east coast of Wonsan. In the past few hours, from Seoul, Moon Chung-in, special advisor on national security to South Korean President Moon Jae-in, reassured that the North Korean leader "is very much alive and in good health." These statements immediately hit the headlines of major Asian and international newspapers that for days have been investigating the unsolved mystery of leader Kim's absence from all public events. Antonio Fiori, Professor at the University of Bologna, a leading Italian expert on Korea, contacted by SIR, promptly clarified: "No one in North Korea knows what is really going on in the leader's inner circle and thus very few people have access to news about Kim Jong-Un's actual medical condition. It is therefore necessary to be extremely cautious." **What happens, in regimes like North Korea, in case of news on the health of the leader?** *There could be destabilizing factors for the regime itself. Especially at this moment in time, since a path towards transition is not envisaged.* The leader is relatively young and has no direct successors. He has children, probably three, but they are very young. The oldest is around 9 years old. So they are in no condition to lead a country. In case something has happened, the schemes of the regime will necessarily need time to readjust the transition phase if it should actually occur. **What are the possible scenarios if the leader were dead?** There are three scenarios. The most obvious would be a transition to the younger sister. From what we know, Kim Yo-Jong could potentially rule the country, but North Korea has never had female leaders, and *in a country that relies on the presence of the military, a woman's leadership may not be welcome.* The second option is to put in power Kim Pyong-il, one of Kim Jong-un's half-brothers, son of the former leader of North Korea, born of a relationship prior to that to which the current leader Kim Jong-un belongs. He is a personality with notable features, a diplomat, well knowledgeable of the

regime, very close to the leadership. However, the family has various branches and naturally when an heir is chosen on one branch of the family, the others will either become less important or fall into disfavour and this could cause problems and disagreements over the choice of the future leader. A third scenario - but it is the least plausible one - could be a sort of extended regency. **Why release the news story at a time of pandemic and quarantine?** *It's speculation from the Western world. But it's not the first time.* In 2014, Kim Jong-un was absent from public life for 40 days. He returned on the scene limping, in all likelihood due to an operation, some people said it was for a hip cyst, others for an ankle cyst. Something definitely had happened, but even then he was thought to be dead. North Korea is a Country that is not intelligible to most people. I have been studying North Korea for 20 years and for 20 years I have been confronted with new situations that were otherwise completely unknown to me. **But one factor remains constant: the world is compelled to put the spotlight on this very small Country in Asia. Why?** Because it is a nuclear-weapon, potentially dangerous State. Of course it has never used nuclear power in offensive operations, only for defensive reasons. The basic philosophy of the North Korean regime is very simple: the atomic arsenal is always declared as a defensive deterrent in case anyone should ever consider attacking North Korea.

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