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THE DEBATE SURROUNDING KIM JU-AE: WHAT MATTERS ISN'T THE 'SUCCESSOR' BUT THE 'SIGNAL'

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AUTHOR'S PRESENTATION



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WHY ARE PARTY CONGRESSES IMPORTANT?

In North Korea, Party Congresses have only become politically significant subjects of analysis since the era of Kim Jong Un. Since the establishment of the North Korean regime, only nine Party Congresses have been held, with Congresses being held infrequently during Kim Jong Il's era. However, since Kim Jong Un came to power, starting with the 7th Party Congress, they have become regularised political events held approximately every five years. Nevertheless, it is difficult to view the Party Congress itself as a core institution of North Korean politics. This is because North Korea's Party Congresses are closer to political events utilised according to the leader's needs than they are to political processes, like party conventions in democratic nations, where policies are discussed and accountability is demanded. In reality, policies or goals presented at the Party Congress are not necessarily implemented afterwards, and there is rare political mechanism for holding anyone accountable for failure. Therefore, when analysing North Korea's Party Congresses, the crucial question is not what was announced at the congress, but rather what the leader sought to gain through it. In this context, the 9th Party Congress held in February 2026 should also be examined not primarily for its policy content, but rather for the political message the Kim Jong Un regime sought to convey through this political event.

INTERNATIONAL ATTENTION FOCUSED ON THE 9TH PARTY CONGRESS

North Korea's 9th Party Congress drew significant attention not only from South Korea but also from the international audiences. Given the closed nature of North Korea's political system, the Party Congress is one of the few public events offering insight into its internal political processes. Furthermore, the Congress serves as an official indicator revealing what the North Korean leadership prioritises. Interest in this Party Congress could be summarised around four main issues.

First was the question of the next successor, particularly whether Kim Jong Un's daughter, Kim Ju-ae, would be officially designated as the successor. Kim Ju-ae has accompanied Kim Jong Un on major activities in recent years and has featured prominently in North Korean media. Notably, her public appearances were sometimes staged in a manner that drew more attention than those of Ri Sol-ju or Kim Yo-jong. In North Korea's history of power succession, the Party event holds significant political meaning. Kim Jong Un himself was granted his official title and formally recognised as a successor through the third Conference of Party

Representatives, and Kim Jong Il also began his full-fledged official political activities after receiving his title at the eighth meeting of the fifth Party Central Committee. Therefore, the possibility arose that Kim Ju-ae might be formally designated as successor at the last Party Congress.

Second was North Korea's policy toward the South and its strategy for the Korean Peninsula. Kim Jong Un recently declared “hostile relations between the two states,” completely redefining inter-Korean relations. North Korea declared it no longer views the North and South as one nation and does not pursue reunification. A key concern was whether this policy line would remain a mere political message or lead to institutional changes like constitutional amendments or alterations to party charters.

Third was Kim Jong Un’s perception of foreign policy and the international order. Key observation points included what kind of relationship North Korea would attempt to establish with the United States, particularly amid the Russian-Ukraine war and strengthened North Korea-Russia ties, and how it would adjust its relationship with China. Fourth was North Korea's domestic economic issues. Policy directions for expanding the tourism industry, developing local economies, and overcoming economic hardship were expected to be discussed.

PARTY CONGRESS RESULTS FALL SHORT OF EXPECTATIONS

The outcome of the Party Congress held late last February was somewhat unexpected compared to many prior observations. Most notably, the succession issue surrounding Kim Ju-ae, which had drawn the most attention, showed virtually no progress. Kim Ju-ae just appeared alongside Kim Jong Un at a military parade following the congress, wearing the same leather coat, but was not granted any official title or political position. Instead, the noticeable change was Kim Yo-jong's political position. Kim Yo-jong re-entered the Political Bureau as a candidate member and assumed a responsible position within the Workers' Party, equivalent to a ministerial-level role.

Regarding foreign policy and inter-Korean relations, the existing line was reiterated. North Korea made clear it has no intention of improving relations with South Korea, emphasizing that issues on the Korean Peninsula should be viewed from the perspective of two hostile states. It also suggested the possibility of negotiations with the United States based on the premise of retaining its nuclear arsenal. Domestically, a partial generational shift among the elite was observed. Senior elites who supported Kim Jong Un's succession, such as Choe

Ryong-hae, O Il-jong, and Pak Jong-chon, are gradually stepping back, while new elites are emerging.

The key point to track going forward is whether North Korea will institutionalise the theory of two hostile states. Following the last Party Congress, it remains to be seen whether matters discussed at the congress will culminate in constitutional amendments through the Supreme People's Assembly, specifically regarding unification, and whether provisions related to unification in the Party charter will also be adjusted.

If no institutional changes aligning with the hostile two-state theory occur in North Korea, this would indicate that even in a North Korea that has realised personal dictatorship, a political process requiring time and cost is necessary to enforce the leader's will. Assuming the leader's actual will differ from outward expressions, North Korea should be assessed as maintaining strategic ambiguity regarding this framework. This is because military actions toward South Korea such as the sinking of the *ROKS Cheonan*, the Yeonpyeong Island shelling, which North Korea has enjoyed due to the unique nature of inter-Korean relations aiming to unification, become forbidden activities that are illegal in accordance with law of war. Regarding former North Korean successors, provocative behaviour towards South Korea has played a crucial role in not only grasping power and tightening internal control, but also in demonstrating political achievement as a genuine successor. A two-state relationship would not allow for this aspect for the next North Korean successor, resulting in the loss of a major option.

IS KIM JU-AE TRULY THE SUCCESSOR?

So, is Kim Ju-ae actually North Korea's next successor? Based on the current situation alone, it is difficult to draw a definitive conclusion. Kim Jong Un's other children have not been publicly revealed. Although unofficial information about the existence of a son circulates, there is no official evidence confirming it. The only child publicly acknowledged is Kim Ju-ae. However, Kim Jong Un's practice of bringing her to public events does not necessarily indicate that she has been designated as his successor in terms of academical perspective.

While Kim Ju-ae clearly occupies a position close to the leader as a member of his family, there are almost no political indicators identifying her as the official successor. In authoritarian regimes, the emergence of a successor typically requires two conditions: elite consent and support, and the formation of public recognition and political legitimacy. North Korea's own history of power succession reflects the importance of these conditions.

Evaluating Kim Ju-ae therefore requires comparison with North Korea's two previous succession experiences. Kim Jong Il's succession preparation period was exceptionally long. Acting as the *de facto* successor from the early 1970s, he accumulated political experience for roughly two decades while building his own political coalition among the first and second generations of partizan elites. He established a loyal network particularly within the military and party organisations.

This extended preparation contributed significantly to the stability of his rule. Despite the severe economic crisis of the 1990s and the so-called "Arduous March," the elite system remained largely intact. This stability can be explained not only by the characteristics of the North Korean system, but also by the elite coalition formed during the succession period.

Kim Jong Un's succession, by contrast, unfolded under very different conditions. His preparation period for the power was extremely short, lasting roughly two years after Kim Jong Il's health began to deteriorate. As a result, Kim Jong Un assumed power without having fully established his own elite network. The core power structure at the time was still dominated by elites formed during Kim Jong Il's era.

These conditions shaped the early politics of Kim Jong Un's rule. His early years were marked by frequent replacements and purges of high-ranking military officials. The execution of Jang Song-thaek, carried out in an unusually public manner, served as a warning signal to existing elite networks all around the North Korean territory. However, once the State Affairs Commission system was consolidated and Kim Jong Un's power base stabilised, large-scale purges gradually declined.

Taken together, these two cases demonstrate that the formation of an independent elite base insulated from the current leader prior to assuming power is a critical factor for successor's regime stability. From this perspective, Kim Jong Un is a leader who personally experienced the importance of building such a network during the succession process. Yet Kim Ju-ae currently holds no official political position, lacks an elite network of her own, and has not accumulated public legitimacy through political achievements. For this reason, it may be premature to determine whether she will become North Korea's next successor before such political processes actually begin.

THEN WHY BRING KIM JU-AE INTO THE PICTURE?

This raises an even more crucial question: Why does Kim Jong Un continue to bring Kim Ju-ae, who is not yet officially appointed a successor, into public view? This question provides a key clue for understanding North Korea's political system, suggesting the possibility that Kim Ju-ae could be a successor both within North Korea and externally. I believe this needs to be interpreted from the perspective of Elite Politics. One of the greatest threats to a dictator is a challenge from within the elite. When the elite's preferences and loyalty are uniformly directed toward the leader, the dictator can secure domestic political stability. If the elite's loyalty is not uniform and cracks appear, the dictator must engage in negotiations and bargaining with the elite. And the start of negotiations signifies a decline in the level of dictatorship.

To mitigate this risk, dictators often signal the existence of a potential successor who will support them. If a challenger to the leader emerges and threatens the incumbent, the fact that a successor exists to inherit power—and that this successor could retaliate based on loyalty to the current leader—is communicated to the elite. This makes it difficult for the challenger to attempt a rebellion. In this regard, Kim Jong Un's public appearances with Kim Ju-ae are likely not merely family events but rather political signals.

Indeed, whenever Kim Ju-ae appears, we frequently see scenes where this young girl, a teenager, is dressed like an adult and made to wear a leather jacket identical to Kim Jong Un's. While Kim Ju-ae is not officially named as the successor, we must pay attention to the situation where she is being staged to be seen as the closest family member to Kim Jong Un and as representing a new generation. Why does the Kim Jong Un regime create such deliberately staged performances? It's a question of some underlying reason for making such a fuss about the possibility of her being the next leader, even while clearly aware that not only North Korea's domestic political actors but the entire world is watching whether Kim Ju-ae is the successor. Personally, I believe understanding this underlying reason is more important than determining whether Kim Ju-ae is the next successor. This is because it serves as a key indicator for gauging the domestic politics currently unfolding within North Korea.

THE POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF KIM YO-JONG AND KIM JU-AE

Kim Yo-jong's presence serves as a crucial comparative case for interpreting the increasingly prominent Kim Ju-ae. What was the reaction of overseas audiences when Kim Yo-jong first appeared in North Korea's political system? Kim Yo-jong began her political activities in earnest starting around 2014, after Jang Song-thaek's execution. Even then, Kim Yo-jong's appearances in North Korean official media were often mocked for seeming awkward and inexperienced. However, she subsequently became a key actor in inter-Korean relations, visiting South Korea as Kim Jong Un's special envoy, delivering messages to the South, and even ordering the demolition of the inter-Korean liaison office in Kaesong.

In North Korea, conducting military activities under one's own name is a privilege even senior generals struggle to attain. After ordering the demolition of the Kaesong Inter-Korean Liaison Office, Kim Yo-jong demonstrated a trajectory of increasing influence within North Korea's political system. She was granted the privilege to conduct military activities—a role rarely extended to any elite other than the North Korean leader. This symbolic act served to elevate Kim Yo-jong's political standing. Since then, Kim Yo-jong has performed powerful political acts, establishing herself as a core actor in Kim Jong Un's regime. Do you recall the incident where it was even suggested for a time that Kim Yo-jong could be Kim Jong Un's successor?

At that time, with Jang Song-thaek gone and Kim Jong Un having consolidated one-man rule in North Korea, Kim Yo-jong's presence served as a card Kim Jong Un played to fill the role, unable to put forward his own children, who were too young at the time, as successors. Interestingly, after Kim Ju-ae's emergence, Kim Yo-jong appeared to be pushed to the political periphery for a time. North Korean state media deliberately staged and released images of Kim Yo-jong sitting alone on the sidelines or being ignored in central political settings. This led to speculation about a power struggle between Kim Yo-jong and Kim Ju-ae, and further discussions about a conflict between Kim Yo-jong and Kim Ju-ae's mother, Ri Sol-ju. While unverified information, opinions, and claims spread, she re-entered the Politburo at this 9th Party Congress. This change can be seen less as competition between Kim Ju-ae and Kim Yo-jong, and more as a signal that Kim Jong Un is maintaining diverse power cards within elite politics by mobilising his family.

CONCLUSION: WHAT MATTERS IS NOT THE ‘SUCCESSOR’ BUT THE ‘SIGNAL’

At this point, it is unclear whether Kim Ju-ae will become North Korea's next leader. While South Korea's National Intelligence Service and other intelligence agencies suggest she is in the nomination or appointment stage, she has not yet been officially appointed. More important than merely consuming Kim Ju-ae's existence for its novelty is the question of why Kim Jong Un is publicly presenting a successor who has not yet been confirmed. Kim Ju-ae's presence likely signifies more than mere succession preparation. It is likely a political message that the North Korean regime centred on Kim Jong Un will continue, and a signal of power stability sent to the elite.

Bloodline succession occurs in authoritarian regimes, but it remains a highly challenging political event even within systems that have established one-person dictatorships. The most unstable period for a dictator is the time around power succession, as it necessitates pre-emptive or post-hoc control over elites who could potentially become challengers. Even Kim Jong Il, who established North Korea's most entrenched one-man dictatorship, had to restore party functions he had effectively abolished during his own era and mobilise institutions and organisations during the power transfer to Kim Jong Un. This underscores how critical power succession is for both the leader and the elite.

Therefore, the aspect we must focus on is tracing the political benefits Kim Jong Un gains through the political process involving the emergence of his two blood relatives, Kim Ju-ae and Kim Yo-jong. This aspect is undoubtedly connected to elite politics. Particularly, we should pay attention to the narratives and effects being created by female elites active in North Korea's political system, such as Choe Son-hui and Hyon Song-wol, in addition to Kim Ju-ae and Kim Yo-jong. The strengthening of female leadership and feminism in North Korea, along with the family's active role within the political system, also signifies the emergence of new actors who do not directly compete with the traditional military and party bureaucracy. This is not merely a preparatory process for power succession for a future female leader. It is crucial to observe what significance the aging second and third partizan faction and the unstable loyalty of newly inflowing elites hold for the current leader.

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