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## Kim the Younger steals the show

By Sunny Lee  
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BEIJING - It was a Jesus move, in a sense. Jesus in the Book of Matthew said the "Day of the Lord" will come "like a thief in the night". And North Korea's new lord-appointee did exactly that.

In the wee hours of Tuesday, North Korea's official mouthpiece the Korean Central News Agency announced, just hours before Pyongyang was to hold its biggest political [convention](#) in decades, that Kim Jong-eun (now, it's also the opportune time for us to spell the young lord's name right), was appointed as a [military](#) general, torpedoing all the "Will he really? But he is too young" suspicions from some North Korea watchers.

Jesus said that no one knows the hour or the day except for God. And North Korea's god, Dear Leader Kim Jong-il, indeed pulled of the show at a quite unexpected time when most were asleep. Tuesday's announcement stands now as the clearest signal that Kim Jong-eun the third and youngest son of the North's god-figure is indeed the "anointed son", set to rule the dynasty when his father is no longer around. He was born in 1983, but Pyongyang propagandizes it to be 1982, to nicely coincide with the year 1912 when his grandfather Kim Il-sung was born. (Likewise, Kim Jong-il was born in 1941, but the North misleads it to be 1942, so that all the Kims were born in the year that ends with the number "two" by divine providence).

"As it has become clear that Kim Jong-eun is the heir, now experts and the [media outlets](#) should go beyond the level of speculating on Jong-eun's status and scope of clout by relying on feelings," said Cheong Seong-chang, a senior fellow at the Sejong Institute think-tank near Seoul.

And now, it may be also a time to seriously examine one of the dogging arguments surrounding the succession: a power struggle that could lead to the collapse of the Kim dynasty. How serious is the power struggle surrounding the young prince and the old king?

Right up to the eve of the Workers' Party [conference](#) that opened on Tuesday, media outlets had their unrestrained heyday of predictions on the prospects of North Korea and they were mostly negative. For example, the British newspaper the Telegraph said a fierce factional power struggle is unfolding, with Kim Jong-eun's uncle, Jang Song-taek, as the center figure of one group that rivals with the powerful reform-minded cadre on the other. The report said Jang had always harbored crown ambitions himself.

The United Kingdom's flagship weekly, The Economist, also worryingly - and wrongly - predicted if the North gave the heir issue "a low profile" during the conference, it would be a bad sign because it would mean uncertainty of leadership. It said that the transition could produce some "dangerous" moments.

"The older Kim, who has been in power since 1994, may be frail, but it is not clear that he is yet ready to anoint his twenty-something, basketball-loving boy," it said.

The BBC also dispatched its reporters and interviewed North Korean defectors along the Chinese border who said there has been an increased incidence of deaths by starvation these days among [North Koreans](#) who are also worried about the uncertainty of their country when the inexperienced heir takes the helm.

On Monday, [South Korea's](#) largest-selling Chosun Ilbo newspaper said that there was deep dissent among young North Korean youths against the Kim clan. "This country will collapse. A house cannot prosper for three generations. A family cannot rule a country for three generations either," the report quoted a North Korean as saying.

The Telegraph's reporter in Moscow then cited Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexei Borodavkin, who said, "Tensions on the Korean Peninsula could not be any higher. The only next step is a conflict."

The newspaper highlighted a possible power struggle, initiated by Jang Song-taek, who will finally reveal his deep-held crown ambition when the time is ripe. The Russian Foreign Ministry official, who is also its chief nuclear negotiator, said that the tension on the Korean Peninsula is so charged that it brims "on the brink of war".

The timing of all these pessimistic reports on the prospect of North Korea drew the

attention of global readers as the long-awaited and delayed Workers' Party conference opened.

Most analysts are pretty much dismissive of these negative pronouncements reflected in the media.

Concerning the view that the Korean Peninsula is on the brink of war, Leonid Petrov, a Russian specialist on inter-Korean affairs, has his way of disowning the report, quoting the Russian official. "Actually, the two Koreans have been on the brink of war for the last 67 years, after they signed an armistice, not a peace treaty, at the end of the Korean War," said Petrov, who teaches at the University of Sydney.

"So, basically, there is nothing surprising for tension to go up and down in the Korean Peninsula. It's pretty obvious to everyone that the current status is the slow progress of a war, which started 67 years ago. The war is still continuing," Petrov said, adding the Russian official's concern should be understood in this larger context of regional security.

Baek Seung-joo, an analyst at the state-run Korea Institute for Defense Analyses in Seoul said the much-touted power struggle has been an ongoing process in North Korea but had been manifested in the form of "loyalty competition" among different factions to earn Kim Jong-il's trust. "It has been mainly manifested as to who attracts more foreign investment or who calls the shots in shaping North Korea's foreign policy.

"The competition is very fierce, but we should distinguish power 'competition' from power 'struggle'," Baek said.

Hajime Izumi, a professor of international relations at Japan's University of Shizuoka, nods to Baek's interpretation. "At the moment, I don't see any indication of physical power struggle in North Korea. I also don't believe the delay of the conference was due to power struggle."

North Korea didn't explain why the conference was delayed from earlier this month. The conference's significance can be seen from what it is described in the Charter of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) issued in 1980, which says that the central committee of the WPK can hold a conference between two national congresses.

North Korea has held two such conferences before, in March, 1958 and the other in October, 1966. The first WPK conference summed up the experience in the anti-sectarian battle in the country and raised issues about strengthening unity and solidarity, and also discussed basic guidelines for a five-year economic plan, according to Xinhua, China's state-run news agency.

At the second WPK conference, Kim Il-sung made a speech titled the "Situation at Present and Tasks of Our Party," in which he analyzed the international situation and clarified the principles and positions of the WPK on the international socialist movement. The conference also laid down the guidelines of paying equal attention to both economic

and

defense

construction.

Lee Hee-ok, a North Korea analyst at Sungkyunkwan University in Seoul, believes the delay in the conference was less due to any internal struggle, but due to lack of preparations to hold such a big event - the biggest in 44 years - while the nationwide flood havoc contributed to the delay as it dampened the festive spirit that was supposed to go with the largest national event in decades.

Cheong at the Sejong Institute think-tank near Seoul also downplayed the possibility for power struggle. "When [Kim Jong-il](#) assumed power in 1994, skeptics argued Kim Jong-il lacked charisma and also said he was too young to handle old generals. But these predictions all turned out to be wrong. Kim Jong-eun is the spitting image of Kim Jong-il in terms of his leadership. He is already known to have a surprising grip on the elite circle. I think there is little obstacle for Jong-eun to take charge."

Yet still, in the discussion of the international media, the crown ambition of Jang Song-taek, Jong-eun's uncle, has been a recurring theme. But analysts here also differ from media interpretations.

"I don't think Jang Song-taek poses any threat to Jong-eun because he is part of the Kim clan," said Petrov, the Russian analyst. "Jang is also much older than Jong-eun. That's why Jong-eun was chosen as the heir. Having the youngest in the family as the nominal front man is very convenient in a society where seniority is very much respected. The Kim's clan doesn't have to worry that Jong-eun will be adventurist or make decisions without consulting the family members first who are older than him."

Baek in Seoul agrees. "In fact, the very moment that Jang Song-taek shows any sign of his desire to become a 'king', instead of a 'kingmaker', he is a dead body," he said. "The reason that Jang was purged in 2003 [and the ensuing three years, before he was reinstated] was when people began to talk that Jang was gaining power and wielding influence. It piqued Kim Jong-il's attention. Jang's experience of being purged taught him a good lesson.

"When the outside media outlets tout that Jang has a crown ambition, it is endangering Jang's life," Baek said.

Cheong at Sejong pointed out that Jang this time didn't receive the title of "commander", contrary to some expectations.

On Monday, as Kim Jong-il issued an order promoting Kim Jong-eun, several commanding officers were also given the rank of general. Kim Kyong-hui, Choe Ryong-hae [See related article, [Dear Leader gives more power to in-crowd](#)] and three others from the ruling party were promoted to general at the same time, Xinhua reported.

The order also gave the rank of colonel general to Ryu Kyong, lieutenant general to Ro

Hung-se, Ri Tu-song and four others, and the rank of major general to Jo Kyong-jun, Jang To-yong and Mun Jong-chol and 24 others.

Also on Monday, Ri Yong-ho, chief of Korean People's Army General Staff, was awarded the military rank of Vice Marshal of the army by the National Defense Commission.

Outdoor performances were staged on Tuesday morning at the Pyongyang Train Station, the Pyongyang Grand Theater and other popular public sites, each drawing hundreds of spectators, according to Xinhua. A state TV broadcast monitored in Seoul said that Kim Jong-il was reappointed as general secretary of the party at the start of the convention, according to a report by Associated Press.

Analysts believe the raft of pessimistic media reports of a power struggle and instability reflect the upsurge of interest on the world's most reclusive country on the eve of its rare event and also importantly a reflection of their wishful thinking.

"Many people still see analyzing North Korea as a task similar to Kremlinology. In their mind, North Korea is an unknown quantity. And they introduce their wishful thinking in their views," said Lee at Sungkyunkwan University in Seoul. "This leads to the situation where you see a small incident and over-extrapolate it, as you are suspicious that there is always a hiding meaning in North Korea's every word and deed."

Baek of the Korea Institute for Defense Analyses said looking at North Korea from one's own cultural frame of thinking could also become a problem. "In a Western country, if a [government](#) fails to satisfy its people economically to such a miserable degree as in North Korea, the government should step down. But North Korea is different. It's not a socialist country. It's not a communist country. It's a monarchy where people suffer from information isolation from the rest of the world. The people have a different political attitude toward the leadership."

Izumi, the Japanese analyst agreed. He also believes that the inordinate amount of attention to the heir could also prevent us from reading Kim Jong-il's ultimate choreography of the succession.

"Internally, succession is not the biggest issue for North Korea. For Kim Jong-il, who is aging and ill, his biggest concern is how to live long. That's the most important thing for him. The outside media talk about his imminent death. He is a dictator. A dictator is concerned most about how to prolong his power and how to live long," he said, adding the succession should be seen in terms of this bigger frame of elder Kim's desire to prolong his power through his successor.

Cheong at Sejong said the biggest pitfall for outside analysis on North Korea was its tendency to underestimate the regime's resilience. "People think this regime is so fragile. They think if there is a little bit of pressure, it could crumble down. They think a power struggle could easily lead to its collapse. Underestimation remains the biggest problem in correctly analyzing North Korea."