



LEGITIMACY AND STABILITY OF NORTH KOREA

By Wang Son-taek

Abstract

Since the death of North Korean leader Kim Il-sung in 1994, the speculation on the imminent collapse of the country has thrived for more than two decades, yet North Korea has survived. The wrong predictions have led to wrong policies on North Korea, which have resulted in the deterioration of key issues, including the nuclear challenge. This chain of wrong steps has shown a serious misunderstanding of North Korea. In this regard, Max Weber's concept of 'legitimacy' can be useful because legitimacy is a decisive factor for types of domination. Weber categorized three kinds of legitimacy: charismatic, traditional, and rational-legal. Kim Jong-un has a traditional legitimacy, as seen in monarchies. This legitimacy has patrimonialism as its domination structure, meaning the relationship between the leader and elites is one of master and retainers. Therefore, the leader can pursue an array of policy options as long as the options are within traditional standards. According to this explanation, what has happened in North Korea since the rise of Kim Jong-un, including the execution of Jang Song-taek, can be understood as normal phenomena. According to the 'legitimacy' discussion, a real factor which could lead to the collapse of the Kim Jong-un regime would be his commitment to the North Korean tradition of resistance against possible intervention from big countries like the U.S. Kim Jong-un will test this commitment periodically, possibly every five years alongside the terms of the Supreme People's Assembly which constituted the domestic political cycle in North Korea under Kim Jong-il.

Key Words: *North Korea, Kim Jong-un, traditional legitimacy, patrimonialism, domestic political cycle*

Introduction

When Kim Il-sung, the legendary dictator of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), died in July 8, 1994, there was a lot of speculation on the future of the country. The imminent collapse of North Korea was widely believed as the most likely scenario. Similar guesswork erupted on December 17, 2011 when his successor Kim Jong-il died. The assumptions were based on the same notion that the new leader, Kim Jong-un, did not have as much charisma as his father or his grandfather. However, North Korea did not collapse. The wild predictions in 1994 were understandable, because it was just after the end of the Cold War. However, the second case in 2011 was embarrassing because the same mistake was repeated without any plausible excuses. The wrong calls were not only humbling, but also damaging because they misled policies on North Korea, which worsened issues surrounding North Korea, including the nuclear issue.

In this regard, the recent argument by Professor Bruce Cumings is timely and intriguing. He listed the examples of the incorrect predictions, criticized them harshly, and urged North Korea watchers to see the North as it is: a resilient regime that will not collapse as readily as critics assume.¹ His argument is solid, because he compared the predictions in the past with the reality witnessed. However, he did not discuss possible reasons for the awry beliefs. This paper will explore reasons why these mistakes happened, which is the first step to correct miscalculations. This paper differs from Prof. Cumings' argument in that it does not assume that the Kim Jong-un regime will survive for a long time.² Instead, this paper will try to get a reliable standard to better assess the future of the regime.

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In order to figure out the reasons behind past mistakes, this paper will use Max Weber's concept of 'legitimacy,' which he defines as the probability that an order is accepted as obligatory, exemplary and valid by actors.³ He thought of legitimacy as a source of authority or domination, which is the probability that a command will be obeyed by a given group of persons.⁴ He presented three types of legitimacy: charismatic, traditional, and rational-legal.⁵ He also categorized three domination structures which vary according to the type of legitimacy: charismatic community, patrimonialism, and bureaucracy.⁶ This framework can be useful, because the wrong calls on North Korea are related to the widespread misunderstanding of North Korea. Following Weber's idea, this paper will try to get a new interpretation on events of the Kim Jong-un regime.

As a more reliable tool to foresee the future of North Korea, this paper will use 'domestic political cycle' analysis which can influence political phenomena.⁷ This analysis focuses on time frames of each political entity. This method assumes that each country has its own domestic political cycle. While leaders can enjoy a stable domination in a given cycle, they also have a challenge to renew this legitimacy for the next cycle before the current cycle is over.

This paper will summarize the concept of legitimacy and apply it to the North Korean political situation in an effort to better assess how long the regime will continue. In essence, scholars and policymakers have made incorrect predictions because they assume Kim Jong-un derives his power from charismatic legitimacy and he exercises his power through bureaucracy. In fact, as I will show in this paper, he is a traditional leader, not a charismatic one, and North Korea is a patrimonial country (not a bureaucratic one). This has important implications for how we analyze and deal with this regime over time.

Predictions Wildly Off the Mark

Surprisingly, lots of predictions on the imminent collapse of the North were made by high-ranking officials of the United States and the Republic of Korea (South Korea). The myth of collapse appeared even before the death of Kim Il-sung. In 1993, Deputy Defense Secretary of the United States, William J. Perry, said in a public speech "this is a government which has clearly failed, and in my opinion is going to collapse sometime in the next few years."⁸

Just after Kim Il-sung died in 1994, it is reported that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) predicted there could be a coup d'état,

“The execution of Jang Song-taek showed that Kim Jong-un might be precarious and brutal, but it should not be used as evidence that the regime is unstable.”

because people of the North did not respect Kim Jong-il.⁹ Even several years after the death, the collapse story never died down. General John Shalikashvili, Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, said to a group of journalists that "we are not in a period where most who watch the area would say it's either going to implode or explode...we're just not quite sure when that is going to happen."¹⁰ In 1996, CIA Director John Deutch testified before the Senate Intelligence Committee, "it will collapse internally or implode because of the incredible economic problems that the country faces." He continued "my own estimate is that how that proceeds will be resolved in the next two or three years." He added, "it is not something that will go on for decades."¹¹

About a year before the death of Kim Jong-il, in December 17, 2011, Second Vice Minister of the Foreign Ministry of South Korea Chun Young-woo told the U.S. ambassador to South Korea Kathleen Stephens that North Korea would collapse in two or three years if Kim Jong-il died.¹² One day after the death became public in 2011, former Director of National Intelligence (DNI) Dennis Blair said that there might be an internal power struggle among North Korean elites within several months.¹³ It is reported that Nam Jae-jun, Director of the National Intelligence Service (NIS) of South Korea said in late 2013, "the mother land should be reunified in 2015 under the South Korean style."¹⁴ The most symbolic example for the collapse argument was presented by President Barack Obama in January 2015. In his interview with YouTube, he said "North Korea is the most isolated, the most sanctioned, the most cut-off nation on Earth...the authoritarianism under Kim Jong-un cannot be duplicated anywhere else...it's brutal and it's oppressive and as a consequence, the country can't really even feed its own people." And he concluded, "over time, you will see a regime like this collapse."¹⁵

The logical arguments presented for the possible collapse can be summed up into two categories: failing economy and



lack of legitimacy. However, the economic element cannot be a reason, because the North has already survived the worst economic period in the late 1990s, when up to three million people died of hunger. Since then, the North Korean economy has been muddling through, if not getting better. So, it would be illogical that a bad economy could be the reason for a regime collapse. The legitimacy issue is more complicated, because it can raise many questions. Does Kim Jong-un have legitimacy? If so, what kind of legitimacy does he have? How strong or weak is that legitimacy?

Charismatic Legitimacy in North Korea

Charismatic legitimacy rests on devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him or her.¹⁶ Weber used the term charisma as a certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which he or she is set apart from ordinary people and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. The leader is seen as a dominantly powerful hero or heroine. The nature of administrative staff is as followers or disciples. The relationship between the two is like a super star musician and his or her fanatics.

Charismatic legitimacy forms a charismatic community as the domination structure. The community is a temporary group of people following the charismatic leader. Everything is fluid in this society. There is no expertise, hierarchy, promotion, nor jurisdiction. Personal connection with the leader is crucially important. Weber stressed that this legitimacy should be routinized at some point in time and transformed ultimately into an established form of legitimacy: traditional or legal legitimacy. The charismatic community should be routinized especially when the succession issue comes up.¹⁷

North Korea under Kim Il-sung should be classified as a charismatic legitimacy country, in which he was an undisputable hero and high-ranking elites were the group of followers. He was a typical charismatic leader especially before the year of 1974 when his son Kim Jong-il was designated as the successor of the supreme leader. The charisma of Kim Il-sung was routinized at that point and the legitimacy type of North Korea since 1974 was changed into traditional one.

Traditional Legitimacy and Kim Jong-un

In traditional legitimacy, elites and masses regard the leader as qualified for maintaining traditions of the society. This legitimacy rests on an established belief in the sanctity of immemorial tradition and the legitimacy of those exercising authority under those traditions.¹⁸ In this case, obedience is owed to a chief who occupies the traditionally sanctioned position of authority and who is bound by tradition. The relationship between the leader and elites is as master and retainers. This type of legitimacy can be found in monarchies and the domination structure for this legitimacy is patrimonialism. The major characteristic of it is the head of state treats governing powers and the related emoluments as private rights.¹⁹ Patrimonialism includes patriarchy, pure patrimonialism, sultanism and feudalism. Patriarchy is a prototype in which father is in charge of household, while sultanism is an extreme case, and feudalism is a derivative of it. Patrimonialism is an evolved form of charismatic community. There are lots of common points between the two systems. The two have no hierarchy, nor regular system of appointment. Expertise of officials is not regarded as important. There is no fixed salary.²⁰ The difference of the two is that patrimonialism is an established system, while charismatic community is a temporary gathering.

Kim Jong-un is not a charismatic leader, but a traditional leader. He rose to the supreme leader of North Korea by the designation of his father, which is one of the examples of how traditional leaders take legitimacy.²¹ Kim Jong-un became the Commander in Chief of the Korean People's Army (KPA), one leg of the Supreme Leader's positions, at the Political Bureau meeting of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) in December 30, 2011. Even before the meeting convened, his succession was announced by the nominal head of the state, Kim Young-nam, the Chairman of the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA). He pronounced that "Respected Comrade Kim Jong-un is our party, military and country's supreme leader who inherits great comrade Kim Jong-il's ideology, leadership, character, virtues, grit and courage" at Kim Jong-il's memorial service on December 28, 2011.²² The national propaganda apparatuses stressed that North Korea should unify under the leadership of the Kim family and follow the tradition of revolution, which means a resistance to outside intervention or invasion.²³ Kim Jong-un even tried to imitate Kim Il-sung's hairstyle, clothing, and body gestures—including laughing and walking—which could remind people in North Korea of their 'Great Leader,' Kim Il-sung.



Over the course of the most recent succession, there were a few efforts by the North Korean regime to strengthen the charisma for the new leader. However, those efforts were minimal, if not meaningless. It was believed that he led bold reform policies including currency revaluation, a city development project in Pyongyang, and a massive scale firework display for his father. However, some of the projects turned out to be failures, ultimately shadowed by the efforts to stress the Paekdu blood tradition, which is another way of saying the Kim Il-sung family has ownership of North Korea.²⁴

Rational-legal legitimacy rests on a belief in the legality of enacted rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands. This type can be found in a democratic society where the rationalization process has progressed a lot. Legal legitimacy goes with bureaucracy as a domination structure. North Korea arranged political events to provide Kim Jong-un with elements of rational-legal legitimacy: at the Third Conference in 2010 he was promoted to a four star general, he became the Commander in Chief of the KPA at the Politburo Meeting in 2011, during the Fourth Conference in 2012 he was elected as the First Secretary of the Party, and at the SPA meeting in 2012 he took the position of the First Chairman of the National Defense Commission (NDC) that is a position for the head of state. North Korea can claim that Kim Jong-un took supreme leader positions through legal processes; however, those events were only nominal with limited importance. It should be natural that we conclude that Kim Jong-un is a leader with traditional legitimacy, and North Korea has little to do with a rational-legal legitimacy state.

Evidence of Instability or Stability in North Korea

When thought of as a traditional state many of the “irrational” acts that experts have been using to predict the regime’s imminent collapse become quite rational. Under the traditional leadership of Kim Jong-un, high-ranking personnel in North Korea are not bureaucrats, but retainers. They do not have expertise, or individual jurisdictions. They can be promoted or demoted at a snap of the leader’s instruction. Take Jang Song-taek for example – the news of his execution on December 17, 2013 surprised world media.²⁵ However, there has been no sign of serious commotion from the North for about two years after his execution. Even though there have been reports of purges or defections from the North, the volume has been much smaller than anticipated.²⁶ This point is important because of Weber’s

observation that personnel in a traditional legitimacy society are merely retainers. The execution of Jang Song-taek showed that Kim Jong-un might be precarious and brutal, but it should not be used as evidence that the regime is unstable.

One unusual phenomena from North Korea under Kim Jong-un is that high-ranking military officers have been repeatedly promoted and demoted too often and too quickly. The first example of humiliated military leaders is Lee Young-ho. He was promoted to vice marshal of KPA when Kim Jong-un became a military general on September 28, 2010. He was depicted as the number one guardian for the young leader recommended by the new leader’s father. However, Lee was suddenly dismissed from every official position and even arrested on July 15, 2012. The reason for the arrest was not announced.

Hyon Young-chol is another example of a dramatic rise and fall of a military leader. Hyon was promoted to military general in September 28, 2010. He became the Chief of General Staff replacing Lee Young-ho. He was even promoted to vice-marshal. However, he was demoted to a four star general around October 2012 and even a three star general around June 2013. Although he was made head of the People’s Military Department in June 2014, he was ultimately executed on April 30, 2015, according to the NIS.²⁷ Regarding this kind of extreme rotation of military elites, Weber argued that promotion and demotion of elites in a traditional legitimacy society are made only by the grace of the leader. Such a frequent rotation can be interpreted as a normal phenomenon in a traditional legitimacy society.

Under patrimonialism, the expertise of elites is not important. Elites are recruited from inside the family including members of the family, slaves, or retainers.²⁸ The appearance of Kim Yeo-jong, sister of Kim Jong-un, is another example that North Korea is a traditional legitimacy state. Kim Yeo-jong took her first official position in early 2012 as Director of Events for the NDC. She assumed the role of chief secretary for Kim Jong-un at the secretary room in the WPK in 2013. It is reported that she became a Vice Minister of Propaganda and Agitation Department (PAD) of the WPK in late 2014. Some experts argued that the appearance of Kim Yeo-jong showed that Kim Jong-un failed to induce loyalty from elites, and he has no choice but to rely on such a young and inexperienced sister. However, it is natural in a traditional legitimacy society for family members to be the most reliable source for high-ranking jobs.²⁹ This case is not an example of unpredictability of the Kim Jong-un regime, but evidence that North Korea is a patrimonial society.



The Future of the Kim Jong-un Regime

Explaining the stability of the Kim Jong-un regime is one thing and talking about the future of the regime is another. In order to get a plausible idea as to the future of the regime, utilizing the ‘domestic political cycle’ can be useful. This analysis assumes that every political entity has its own domestic political cycle by which the leader, elites and masses accept a legitimacy of the leader or ruler as effective. When a political cycle completes one round, there must be a renewal of legitimacy for a new round. In a democratic society, elections—especially presidential elections—become a clear borderline between the old and new cycles. In dictatorships and some monarchies, a periodic inauguration ceremony of the ruler or a national anniversary can be the equivalent of an election in democratic countries.

North Korea also has a domestic political cycle. The cycle was formed under Kim Il-sung, and coincided with economic development plans. The periods of the plans vary—three years, five years, and sometimes seven years. The first half of a cycle starts with positive slogans for development. They try to implement the plan with full energy until the second half of the period begins. At that point, limitations of resources and contradictions of a planned economy arise. The unrest leads the supreme leader to take shocking or destructive measures in order to subdue any potential challenges. The leader ultimately resolves the anxiety and creates a new atmosphere for a new start.³⁰

Under Kim Jong-il’s leadership, this cycle went together with the SPA cycle. When the Assembly reshuffles, their first mission is to elect a Chairman of the NDC and hold an inauguration ceremony. Before the ceremony, sometimes several days and sometimes one to two years, they might take serious provocative actions such as launch a long-range missile.³¹ The ceremony passes through with maximum tension. The issue can last several more months, sometimes years, until the leader resolves it with a smart and decisive manner. After resolving a crisis, North Korea under Kim Jong-il preferred soft-line policies.

Kim Jong-un has just started his reign, so it might be premature to definitively assess his standard for a political cycle. However, the SPA cycle is the most probable candidate, because the circumstances on North Korea are similar to his father’s. So, it could be natural that we regard the SPA cycle as the domestic political cycle under the Kim Jong-un leadership. Before the Assembly started a new term in April 2014, there were a series

of dramatic incidents, including the execution of Jang Song-taek. It is possible that Kim Jong-un finished the first round of his domestic political cycle by wrapping up reorganization of his own staff. The new cycle which began in April last year ends in 2019, with possibility for internal tension beginning about one year or two years before the next cycle. Under this line of thought, we can discuss that the regime will not collapse until at least 2017 or 2018, if the other factors remain the same. If Kim Jong-un can make people believe that he is maintaining the traditions of North Korea, he can renew his legitimacy and expect another comfortable five-year cycle.

Conclusion

The ‘legitimacy’ analysis of the North Korean political system presents a different picture from conventional views. This approach demonstrates that the Kim Jong-un regime has a traditional legitimacy with patrimonialism. Under this domination type, the phenomena used to explain why the Kim Jong-un regime was unstable might be mobilized as counter evidence for the stability of the regime. The execution of Jang Song-taek was an example of the normal punishment process against disloyal elites. Excessively frequent rotation of high-ranking military officers is part of an effective technique to extract maximum loyalty. Appointing people with no knowledge and experience into high-level jobs is also one of the characteristics of a society based on this kind of legitimacy. So, lots of wrong calls about the North Korean political system originated from misunderstanding the type of legitimacy and domination structure of the North.

What are the right factors for determining whether North Korea is stable or not? Because North Korea is a traditional legitimacy state, management of traditions should be regarded as important. Kim Jong-un should maintain the tradition he received from his father and grandfather, which is to resist against external threats from so called imperialist countries. Kim Jong-un has tried to prove that he has the determination and capability to resist against a powerful adversary like the U.S. He is doing what he has to do in order to keep his legitimacy. Therefore, it is not appropriate to believe that North Korea will collapse in a short period of time, at least not until the end of the current domestic cycle in early 2019.

Endnotes

- ¹ Bruce Cumings, "Getting North Korea Wrong," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientist*, Vol. 71(4) (2015), pp.64-76.
- ² *Ibid.*, p. 75.
- ³ Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich Ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press; 1978): p. 31. Weber's concept might look outdated, but his idea of legitimacy is still useful, because he studied essential characteristics of human society regardless of times.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 53, pp. 61-62. The editors noted that domination is translated from the German word 'Herrschaft' and both 'domination' and 'authority' as English translations are correct although each stresses a different component of Herrschaft.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 212-301.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 262-266. Weber explained that the three kinds of legitimacy are pure or ideal types for research purposes. In the real world, legitimacy exists in the form of a combination of three kinds. There are various kinds of legitimacy according to the degree of combination within the three legitimacies. So, when we say a certain state is a traditional legitimacy society, it means the dominant kind of legitimacy in that society is traditional legitimacy, and there are some minor elements of the other kinds.
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- ⁸ R. Jeffrey Smith, "Korean Strongman: 'Crazy' or 'Canny?," *Washington Post*, September 26, 1993.
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- ¹⁵ *Youtube* January 22, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GbR6iQ62v9k>.
- ¹⁶ Weber, p. 215.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 246.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 215.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 237.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 229.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 246-249.
- ²² Choe Sang-hun, "North Korean Mourners Line Streets for Kim Jong-il's Funeral," *New York Times*, December 28, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/29/world/asia/kim-jong-il-funeral-north-korea.html>.
- ²³ In Korea, both North and South, the spirit of resistance against possible intervention from big countries is significant, because of the long history of a single nation-state experience. The spirit is widely and deeply soaked in every corner of Korean culture, and it is a part of major traditions of North Korean society. The propaganda strategy of North Korea has relied on stressing the resistance, persuading people that they should unite and fight against imperialistic enemies like the U.S., and the war could be ended with victory under superb leaders such as Kim Il-sung and his blood descendents. And, it has been working successfully for maintaining the absurd dictatorship in North Korea for a long time, together with highly skillful coercive measures.
- ²⁴ 'Paekdu blood' is a North Korean propaganda item. Paekdu is a mountain in North Korea which serves as a mysterious guardian for the Korean people. Kim Il-sung claimed that he had fought against Japanese imperial forces in and around the mountain in the 1930s, and his son Kim Jong-il claimed that he was born on the mountain.
- ²⁵ Yonhap News Agency, "N. Korea executes leader's uncle for 'treason' KCNA," 13 December, 2013.
- ²⁶ It is reported that scores of North Korean elites were purged and defected from the North after the killing of Jang Song-taek. But, the number of the desperate elites is not so significant. About sixty years ago, North Korea hunted down about 60,000 criminals, arrested more than 10,000 hostile figures including about 2,000 suspects for espionage actions after 'August Faction Incident,' the biggest political turmoil in North Korea, in 1956. Paek Jun-ki, "Political Changes in North Korea during 1950s," *Modern History of North Korea* (in Korean), the University of North Korean Studies Ed. (Seoul: Hanwool Academy, 2004), pp. 264-265.
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²⁸ Weber, p. 228.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 228-231.

³⁰ Wang Son-taek dissertation, pp. 88-130.

³¹ The first problematic launch of the Taepo-dong missile from North Korea happened on August 31, 1998. Five days later, the 10th SPA began, and the Assembly inaugurated Kim Jong-il as the Chairman of NDC. Another launch of a long-range missile was on April 5, 2009. It was again four days before the beginning of the 12th SPA. They launched another missile on April 13, 2012 and it was two days before the 100th birthday anniversary of Kim Il-sung. The second North Korean nuclear crisis started in late 2002, and it was one year before the 11th SPA. Jang Song-taek was executed in December 12, 2013, and it was four months before the beginning of 13th SPA.

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