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## CONTROL AND CONCEAL: HOW PYONGYANG CONDUCTS POLITICS

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The Democratic People's Republic of Korea is famously ill-named. All four words are false. It is no democracy; the people decide nothing. More hereditary monarchy than republic, its culture and institutions owe more to Stalin (who created it) and Mao than to anything Korean.

This singular polity controls and conceals actual politics; yet they exist, as everywhere. Policy choices have to be made, and implemented. Personnel must be picked, or purged. Succession is a seismic event, or rather a process; its success in a dictatorship can never be guaranteed.

DPRK politics are distinctive, maybe unique. Public politics is conducted as theatre, perfectly choreographed. All actors play their parts with gusto; no one strays from the script. This feat was accomplished early. In 1971 North Koreans in East Berlin showed me a film of the Fifth Congress of the nominally ruling Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), held a year earlier. Even then, already, the masses in the streets wept for joy to behold

their Great Leader Kim Il-sung.

Thereafter WPK Congresses grew rarer. A decade (it ought to be five years) elapsed before the Sixth in 1980 confirmed the rumour, hitherto strongly denied, that the mysterious 'Party Centre' was Kim's son Kim Jong-il, who was anointed successor. In defiance of statute, WPK Congresses then ceased altogether for a third of a century. Delegate conferences, a lesser form of conclave, were convened in 2010 to introduce the next dauphin, Kim Jong-un; and again in 2012, after Kim Jong-il's death, when his son formally assumed state and Party leadership.

In his fifth year in power, Kim Jong-un is a paradox: a tyrant who executed his uncle, yet has some concern for due process. His father, whose *Songun* (military-first) policy favoured the Korean People's Army (KPA), let the Party's upper ranks atrophy. The Central Committee (CC) never even met, while Politburo members died but were not replaced. Both now have full complements. The Seventh Congress will complete this restoration of "normal service".

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This comes at the military's expense. Kim is visibly taming the KPA: putting key Party cadres like his close aide Hwang Pyong-so in uniform and in charge, while rotating the top brass at dizzying speed. The Jong-un era has seen six defence ministers (MPAF) and five chiefs of the general staff (CGS), so no general can build a fief like uncle Jang Song-thaek did. Such rapid musical chairs surely demoralise the KPA. For all the bellicose bluster, war is not in the plan.

What to expect in Pyongyang on May 6? Not debate, obviously. Adulation of Kim Jong-un, and reconfirmation of his three-fold leadership – state, party, army – perhaps with new titles.

Also certain are personnel changes. A gerontocracy headed by a juvenile, North Korea needs to even things up. Elderly cadres will be retired and new blood promoted. Fresh faces will be closely scrutinised for any reformist leanings. Yet as with Kim himself, it is wishful thinking to assume younger North Koreans are necessarily modern-minded, much less doves. Recent appointments, especially military vis-à-vis South Korea, suggest hawks are in the ascendant.

Promotions, and any purges, may also offer pointers on policy. Kim's *Byungjin* watchword – literally 'tandem', i.e. both nuclear weapons and economic growth: guns and butter – will be reaffirmed. Less clear is how it can be delivered. Kim has created 20 new special economic zones (SEZs), but the latest UNSC sanctions mean few if any foreign investors will risk it.

SEZs are public if empty, but most economic steering is done by stealth: itself incompatible with real Deng-style reform. One acid test will be if the Seventh Congress

publicly proclaims and expands the so far shadowy June 28 (2012) and May 30 (2014) measures, which allegedly grant farms and factory managers more autonomy. If these go unmentioned amid all the vapid Leader-worship, this means Kim has not yet grasped the adage: "it's the economy, stupid".

Can he, as Scott Snyder put it, have his yellowcake and eat it? Pyongyang and its elites are modestly prospering, but the rest of the country lives mediocrally. Such acute inequalities are not unique. North Korea's strains are severe, yet perennial neo-con hopes for regime collapse still appear wishful thinking. Kim Jong-un lacks his father's ability and long apprenticeship, yet he seems to be in charge and the system he inherited is holding together – at least for now.

Much depends how hard the new UNSC sanctions will bite. Even before those, Ken Gause reckoned that the patronage network which buys elite loyalty (no true believers any more) is getting harder to finance. In principle that spells trouble in future; in practice, maybe not. The puzzling lack of known factions within the DPRK nomenklatura may reflect acute awareness that, as Benjamin Franklin said, if they do not hang together then they risk hanging separately.

Thus technocrats may yearn for reform, but fear any upheaval could end like Germany: not empowering but dispossessing them. They also fear Kim's random and sanguinary wrath, but are impotent to challenge this. With elites cautious and the masses regimented as ever, Kim Jong-un has little to fear from within. For his interlocutors, two decades of premising failed policies on predictions of North Korea's collapse should surely prompt an overdue reset.