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GLOBAL

## Defying History: How Kim Jong Un Could Hold Onto Power for Decades

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Kim Jong Un, left, speaks in Pyongyang. Right, a painting of grandfather Kim Il Sung. (Reuters, Wikimedia)

The world has been predicting North Korea's imminent downfall for a generation now, and why shouldn't we? The Stalinist, totalitarian nations of

the world have collapsed so consistently and in such quick succession that this one, perhaps the faintest star in the Soviet constellation, seemed sure to follow. If the Soviet Union, for all its weapons and natural resources, couldn't keep back the tides of history, how could impoverished little North Korea? If populous, powerful China felt it had no choice but to reform and open, wouldn't its angry neighbor have to do the same?

Yet, impossibly, the North Korean system [continues to goose step along](#) fundamentally unchanged, its food stores barren and its [gulags full](#), its million-man army and [ethno-nationalist cult of personality](#) defying everything that says they should have long since rotted away from within.

We may have some hints to North Korea's baffling survival in a [new report](#) from the International Crisis Group, which concludes, based partly on "interviews and observations" from within the country, that new leader Kim Jong Un "could be in power for decades." They predict that "reform prospects are dim" and Kim could have "a growing nuclear arsenal." It's entirely possible that they'll be just as wrong as were the analysts insisting Kim Jong Il wouldn't survive the 1990s -- North Korea analysis is necessarily reliant on conjecture, both because the society is so closed and because its system has so few analogues in history -- but, if nothing else, they offer compelling theories for how the Kim family has kept such tight control for six astounding, horrifying decades.

If there is any common theme to the Crisis Group's findings, it's that the Kim regime has managed to turn North Korea's many weaknesses -- poverty, hunger, insecurity, corruption -- into not just strengths, but pillars of stability. Here, extrapolated from the report, is a sort of brief handguide to how North Korea has stayed so remarkably stable for so long, and might still for "decades" to come.

**Nothing To Lose:** The world has already taken so many things away from North Korea, it doesn't really have many deterrents left, short of all-out war. The North Korean military has made clear that it will over-react to any military provocations, making any strike extremely risky as it could slide into full-on -- and potentially nuclear -- war. The

U.S. occasionally boosts food aid, giving North Korea an incentive to cooperate, but the regime rarely holds to its side of the deal and **doesn't seem too bothered** when the food aid is taken away. "Pyongyang might feel there is little risk in testing more long-range missiles or another nuclear device," the Crisis Group report warned. "If it is strongly motivated to do so, there is probably little that could dissuade it."

**The Craziest Kid on the Block:** As North Korea gets poorer and the rest of the world gets richer, "the conventional military balance ... continues to deteriorate for the North." South Korea is **more closely cooperating** with the U.S. and even Japan. The North and South are just no longer even matched, with the latter growing stronger all the time. So North Korea is using its poverty and isolation as its weapons, striking out at the world -- sometimes **apparently at random** -- and building up its "asymmetric capabilities" to keep its borders as militarized and tense as possible. This keeps North Koreans in, the world out, and Pyongyang's enemies focused on preventing another deadly attack.

**Overlap, Inefficiency, Infighting:** North Korean society has been so "atomized" that it functionally does not exist outside of state institutions. Food is so scarce,

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and the risk of finding yourself in the sprawling gulags so high, that individual North Koreans depend on the state to get by, but that means joining the system. The regime keeps people busy with a vast, nonsensical bureaucracy, with redundant agencies or offices pitted against one another. Want to hold onto your family's food rations? Try to do a better job than the guy across the street who has your same responsibilities, or better yet see if you can get him suspected of ideological impurity. Security agencies and party organs -- the offices most likely to accumulate power, push for reform, or challenge the Kims -- are designed to "monitor" one another. The "state security ministry" looks for "political crimes," the "defense security command" constantly investigates the military, and the "general political bureau" indoctrinates the officers while judging civilian leaders for crimes real, suspected, or imagined. The higher you climb, the more eyes are watching you, and the more people will have something to gain by your fall.

**The Prisoners Are Also the Guards:** Everyone is required to join a "loyalty"-enforcing "mass organization," such as the "Kim Il Sung Socialist Youth League." Because North Korean society is designed to be so fiercely competitive, and because that competition doesn't mean doing a better job so much as sniffing out "ideological impurity" both at work and at home, you've got to be willing to turn against your neighbor just to survive. Any North Korean who wants a good chance at feeding their family must join the state's efforts "maintain ideological discipline" and "provide another surveillance mechanism for state security." About one out of every 25 married women, for example, are recruited into the *inminban* "neighborhood units" that are expected to openly spy on their friends and family and to sniff out enemies, whether they exist or not; failure to produce makes you suspect. Everyone is an informer and an enforcer, doing Kim Jong Un's work for him.

**Waiting for Doom:** All of those analysts can't be completely wrong in seeing

North Korea's stability as tenuous, even doomed. And that's the message that North Korea itself hammers home to its people, warning them that a world war or another famine could be right around the corner. Kim Jong Un can't fix his "failed state," with its "food insecurity," "widespread economic problems," and war footing against a world that would love to see him fall. So he uses them for his advantage. "The atmosphere of fear and chronic insecurity in which the [state] media constantly warns that war could break out at any moment" has North Koreans too exhausted and too worried about surviving these omnipresent threats to come together and ask if there might be a better way.

### **But There Is One Major Weakness in the North Korean System:**

"Uncontrolled information inflows are deeply subversive and pose a long-term threat to regime survival," the Crisis Group report notes. "84 percent of defectors, refugees, and travelers said they received unsanctioned information by word of mouth." The more than North Koreans learn of the outside world's comparatively astonishing wealth and freedom, the less interested they seem to be in participating in the North Korean system. The Kim regime seems to understand the enormous threat this poses. In 2011, when revolution broke out in Libya, 200 North Korean workers there were **outright banned** from ever coming home. "Information is beginning to seep into North Korean society, but it probably will take considerable time before inflows might cause regime change or transformation."

In the meantime, the more that Kim Jong Un can keep his people poor, terrified, and desperately infighting for their basic survival; the more he can keep his borders sealed by escalating military tensions along the borders; the less information will creep in and the longer, according to the Crisis Group's analysis, he is likely to hang on.

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### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**



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