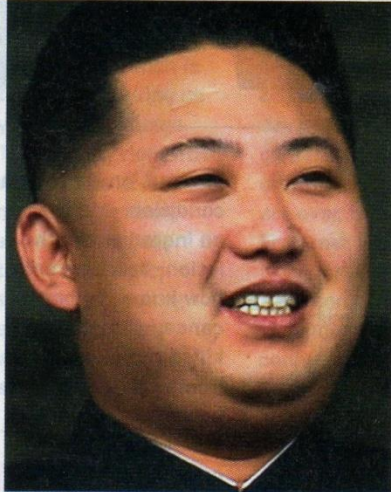


**Dangerous Nation:** North Korea spends lavishly on its 1.2 million-man army and nuclear weapons program.

# The World's Newest Dictator



**Kim Jong Un**, North Korea's new leader

**W**ith its nuclear weapons, strange cult-like society, and a state-run economy that doesn't produce nearly enough food to feed its hungry population, North Korea has long been viewed with concern by the U.S. and its allies.

Now, add to that volatile mix a 20-something leader who is virtually unknown to the outside world. Kim Jong Un—who assumed power with the death last month of his father, Kim Jong Il—is

so mysterious that no one even knows for sure how old he is (probably 28 or 29). The world got its first real glimpse of him only last year when it became clear he was being groomed to rule this last bastion of hard-line Communism.

BY PATRICIA SMITH

Whether the younger Kim can hold on to power is still a question. And what he might do to show North Korea and the rest of the world that he's really in charge is adding to unease among its neighbors and in Washington.

“We’re entering a period that is espe-

cially dangerous,” says Jim Walsh, a North Korea expert at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. “Here is a young leader who may be distrusted by the military, and he has to prove himself. And that can lead to miscalculation and inadvertent war.”

In poor health since suffering a stroke in 2008, Kim Jong Il died of a heart attack while traveling on his train in December. In Pyongyang, the capital, thousands flooded public squares and sobbed with grief, though experts



**Cult of Personality:** North Koreans in Pyongyang bow before a statue of Kim Il Sung, the country's founder and grandfather of the new leader.

say the mass mourning was probably a mix of coercion by the government and the impact of North Korea's cult of personality, in which the ruler is considered every North Korean's father.

Eighteen years ago, Kim Jong Il inherited control of North Korea from his father, Kim Il Sung, who founded the country in 1948 and is still revered and worshipped—literally—as a god (*see photo, above*).

### Widespread Starvation

In recent years, conditions within North Korea have sharply deteriorated. The economy is in shambles: About three-quarters of its factories sit idle. A series of droughts and floods led to massive crop failure starting in the 1990s, and as many as 2 million people have died of starvation.

There are almost no cars on the road, even on the country's biggest highways. Because of power shortages, electricity is turned off at night in much

of the nation, including the capital.

Ordinary citizens have no Internet access. TVs and radios are altered so they receive only government channels: Punishment for watching foreign films or TV shows is stiff—for example, six months in a labor camp for watching a Jackie Chan action movie from Hong Kong.

In addition to being cut off from the outside world, North Koreans are bombarded with propaganda. Homes are equipped with loudspeakers attached to the wall. It's like a radio, but with no dial or off-switch; all day long, it blares state-sponsored slogans and sanitized news.

That propaganda can be shameless: During a famine, North Korean news media warned citizens against overeating by telling a tale of a man who ate his fill—and then exploded.

*New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof recalls a trip to North Korea during which he interviewed two random high school girls in the countryside.

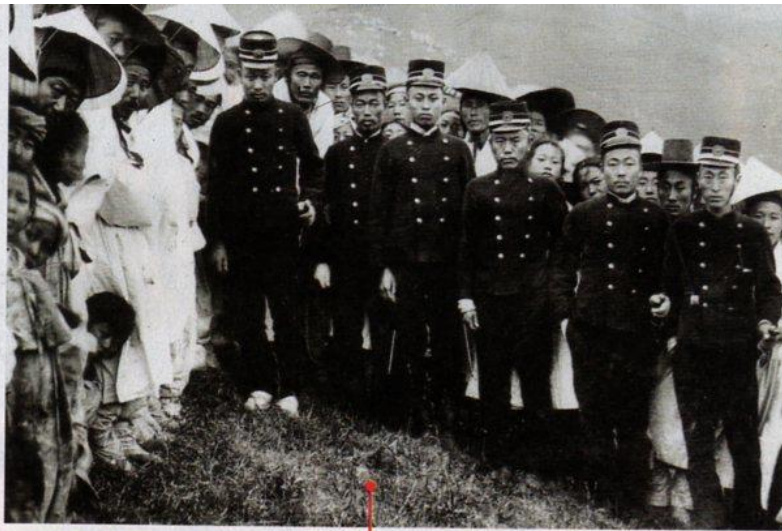
"They started speaking simultaneously and repeating political lines in perfect unison," he says. "They could have been robots."

North Korea is perhaps the most totalitarian and capricious state in the world. Since the disabled are considered eyesores, they're often expelled from the capital to keep up appearances. A soccer coach who defected to South Korea told reporters before the 2010 World Cup that players were rewarded with apartments if they won in international competitions, but were sometimes sent to work in the coal mines if they lost.

### Who Is Kim Jong Un?

Kim Jong Un wasn't supposed to inherit power. But his two older brothers were either uninterested or deemed incapable. (His eldest brother fell out of favor

*With reporting by Martin Fackler, David E. Sanger, Choe Sang-Hun, and Nicholas Kristof of The New York Times.*



## TIMELINE: Korea

### 1910 Japanese Occupation

Japan annexes Korea and subjects it to a brutal 35-year occupation.

### 1945 Division

After Japan's defeat in World War II, the Korean peninsula is divided, with Soviet troops occupying the north and U.S. forces in the south. In 1948, North and South Korea become separate nations.

### 1950 Korean War

The Korean War begins when North Korea invades South Korea. American-led U.N. troops defend South Korea; Chinese troops fight alongside North Koreans.

### 1953 Cease-fire

The war ends in a stalemate, with a cease-fire but no peace treaty. Tens of thousands of U.S. troops remain in South Korea to guard against another invasion.

after he tried to enter Japan on a fake passport to visit Tokyo Disneyland.)

Little is known about Kim Jong Un: He attended school for a time in Switzerland and speaks some English and probably German.

Since the young Kim was chosen as successor, North Korea has made several hostile moves against the South, including sinking a South Korean warship, which killed 46 sailors, and firing on a South Korean island. Such incidents may be efforts to build up Kim Jong Un's military credentials.

Within days of his father's funeral, the young Kim was named "supreme leader" of the country and commander of its 1.2 million-man army. Weeks later, North Korea's media proclaimed him a "military genius."

Despite outward appearances of a smooth transfer of power, however, it



**Dire poverty:** In the countryside, a woman and a girl wash clothes in a river.

remains uncertain whether a behind-the-scenes struggle may be playing out among the generals and party leaders. At stake is whether Kim Jong Un becomes a forceful leader in his own right, or a figurehead. (His father succeeded in keeping the elites happy by stocking their households with foreign luxury goods and by sending anyone who fell out of favor to labor camps.)

American officials worry that any

power struggle that challenges the young Kim's control could prompt him to lash out, possibly with military action against South Korea.

### Korean War

Tensions on the Korean peninsula are nothing new (*see timeline*). Japan occupied all of Korea from 1910 until the end of World War II. When the fighting stopped in 1945, the Soviet Union occupied the northern half and installed a Communist regime, while U.S. and Allied forces controlled what became South Korea.

In 1950, North Korea, backed by the Communist regimes of the Soviet Union and China, invaded the South. The United Nations called up an international force to defend South Korea, with the U.S. supplying 90 percent of the troops and equipment.

By the time a cease-fire was signed in 1953, 34,000 Americans had been



## 1994 Kim Jong Il

After Kim Il Sung's death, his son, Kim Jong Il, becomes North Korea's dictator. The country remains closed off from most of the world.

## 1995 Famine

When its state-run economy can't produce enough food, North Korea suffers famines, with more than one million dying. Severe food shortages continue today.

## 2006 A Nuclear Power

North Korea performs an atomic weapons test, confirming that it has become a nuclear power despite efforts by the U.N. and the U.S. to prevent it.

## 2011 A New Ruler

After Kim Jong Il's death in December, his youngest son, Kim Jong Un, takes over. (Above, public mourning after Kim Jong Il's death.)

killed. But North Korea and South Korea have never signed a peace treaty.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, North Korea became one of the world's few remaining Communist states. That's when its economy began a catastrophic decline. While millions starved, the regime spent a fortune to maintain its massive army and build up a secret nuclear weapons program.

In 2006, North Korea announced it had exploded a nuclear bomb. Three years later, it tested ballistic missiles, expelled U.N. nuclear inspectors, and scrapped all of its agreements with South Korea. In 2010, North Korea revealed a uranium-enrichment plant at Yongbyon that American officials believe is meant for producing more nuclear weapons.

All this is deeply troubling to the U.S.—which still maintains 28,000 troops near South Korea's capital, Seoul, well within range of a North Korean attack. Also cause for worry is North Korea's habit of selling whatever weapons it develops to anyone willing to pay for them, possibly including terrorists.

Despite all the uncertainty of the transition period, Kristof, who has covered North Korea for *The New York Times* on and off since 1987, says it's a mistake to assume the regime is on the verge of collapse.

### Expect the Unexpected

"North Korea's regime could collapse tomorrow—or it could stagger along for another 20 years," Kristof says.

Some experts believe that Kim Jong Un will likely shy away from any major

confrontation for the first few years.

"He'll need to reduce tensions with the United States in order to buy time," says Professor Masao Okonogi of Keio University in Tokyo.

But North Korea has never been known for doing what's expected.

"Anyone who tells you they understand what is going to happen," says one former American military commander in South Korea, "is either lying or deceiving himself." •

## A Tale of Two Koreas

Since their division into two nations in 1948, South Korea has become an economic powerhouse, while North Korea's economy is in ruins.

	NORTH KOREA	SOUTH KOREA
Population	24 million	49 million
Life Expectancy	69 years	79 years
Per Capita GDP*	\$1,800	\$30,000
Exports (2009)	\$2 billion	\$358 billion
Internet Users	Very few outside government	39 million
Cellphone Users	432,000	51 million

SOURCE: THE WORLD FACTBOOK 2012, CIA

\*U.S. PER CAPITA GDP: \$47,200