



Is Kim Jon Un The Reformer, And The Executed Uncle Jang Seong-Taek The Reactionary?

Posted: 01/23/2014 12:43 pm

Chung-in Moon is Professor of Political Science, Yonsei University and the author of "The Sunshine Policy."

SEOUL -- One of the most striking pieces of news in 2014 was the ruthless execution of Jang Song-taek, the uncle of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, who was seen to be the young leader's guardian as well as the country's second most powerful man in the country.

Prior to his execution, he was expelled from the Korea Workers' Party (KWP) for "anti-party, counter-revolutionary factional acts" and then executed for treason, self-idolization, economic mismanagement and corruption. His sudden removal triggered wild speculations about the power structure, regime stability and policy lines in the North. But as the dust settles from the surprise announcement, a nuanced picture is beginning to emerge.

Previously, a common understanding of the power structure in the North was summed up in the phrase, "Kim Jong Un reigns, whereas Jang rules." Jang's power was thought to be solid not only because of his personal ties to the Kim family as a brother-in-law of Kim Jong Il, but also because of his control over the Administration Department of the KWP, which oversees all the organizational operations of the party and the state as well as the security and judiciary apparatus. Moreover, it was said that had built extensive networks of protégés in the party, the state and the military.

But this rock-solid base turned out to be an illusion, or rather, a projection from outside looking in. Jang was after all purged twice in the early 2000s for engaging in factional activities, and was restored in 2006 only after a lengthy re-education program. Fearful of surveillance and punishment, few dared to be associated with him during and after this period. That is why the scope of the purge in the aftermath of his execution has been rather limited, and confined largely to his immediate subordinates.

Prime Minister Pak Bong Ju, Party Secretary Kim Yang Gon and Ambassador to China Ji Jae Ryong, all of whom were believed to have been among Jang's close confidants, remain in power. This, then, reveals that Jang was not as powerful as outside observers believed. Ironically, the exaggeration of his power and influence by the foreign media might have been a contributing factor in his downfall.

Jang also used to be portrayed as the driving force behind opening and reform in North Korea, since he was in charge of special economic zones near the China border such as Ra-son and Hwanggeumpyong as well as overall activities to attract foreign capital. A careful examination of the "Report on the Enlarged Meeting of Political Bureau of Central Committee of Korean Worker's Party and sentencing of a special military tribunal of the DPRK Ministry of State Security, however, reveals that he was the primary beneficiary of vested interests and he obstructed economic reform efforts by the DPRK cabinet. He could, therefore, have been purged and executed because of his obsession with material and organizational interests that challenged Kim Jong Un's reform initiative to streamline the country's economic management. If this turns out to be true, then Kim Jong Un should be seen at a reformer, whilst Jang was a reactionary.

It has been widely predicted that Jang's removal would mean a victory for conservative hardliners, posing a major setback to moderates favoring opening and reform. This assertion also seems to be misleading.

First, no signs of personnel changes signaling policy shifts can be detected. Major policy-makers such as Pak Bong Ju (economic reform), Kim Yang Gon (inter-Korean relations), Kang Sok Ju (nuclear and American affairs), and Kim Young Il (China) are still in their positions.

Second, in his New Year address, Kim Jong Un not only underscored the central role of the cabinet in economic management and the importance of creativity and innovation in individual economic units; he also expressed his willingness to improve inter-Korean relations.

Kim's policy stance has been manifested by the cabinet's emphasis on incentive systems for firms and the agricultural sector as well as on the continuing expansion of special economic zones. And on January 16, Pyongyang's National Defense Commission proposed to Seoul that mutual denunciations and provocative behaviors be stopped, including the suspension of the Republic Of Korea-US joint military exercise scheduled for late January.

After Seoul turned down the proposal, describing it as a "disguised form of peace offensive," Pyongyang responded by saying it would unilaterally and proactively take practical measures to build trust between the North and South.

Third, although the North accused China of being an accomplice in Jang's crimes, it is accelerating its economic cooperation with China. All of this appears, at least for now, to undermine the argument that Jang's removal and execution will negatively affect Pyongyang's pragmatic path toward reform.

Finally, Jang's death revived the old thesis of a "coming contingency in the North" - that is to say, an unraveling of the Kim dynasty and the collapse of the regime. If the past is any guide, this proposition seems equally false. The purge of major opponents in the past (for example, in 1956 and 1967) led to a consolidation, not a weakening, in the power of the ruling Kim family. That is what is happening in the North at present.

Following the purge of Jang, the party, the military, the state, and the people have all renewed their expressions of unfailing loyalty to the young leader. In addition, the openness of the purge and execution has generated a horrifying demonstration effect that will likely deter political challenges, at least in the short term. Thus, the likelihood that Jang's execution heralds a coming collapse of the North seems virtually nil. However, if excessive idolization of Kim Jong Un and rigid governance were to persist over the medium term, this would retard economic performance, and depletion of economic resources would severely undercut regime stability.

For now, a serious moral dilemma awaits. The brutal execution of Jang and his associates could make it harder for South Korea and the U.S. to treat Kim Jung Un as a legitimate dialogue counterpart. Nevertheless, no matter how errant and incomprehensible the North is judged to be, there seems to be no choice but to recognize and engage with Pyongyang in order to reduce tensions on the Korean Peninsula, to foster opening and reform, and to facilitate a negotiated resolution of the nuclear quagmire.

In short, practical problem solving, rather than moralizing judgment, should guide our approach to North Korea, despite the execution of Jang.