

Lessons on North Korean stagecraft in Kim's absence

By Foster Klug

The Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — Even when Kim Jong Un was nowhere to be seen, he was everywhere.

From “Saturday Night Live” spoofs to the wild theories of journalists across the globe trying to parse his five-week absence from the public eye, the 30-ish leader of North Korea captured nearly as many headlines as he did when he threatened to nuke his enemies last year.

The mystery ended October 14 when Kim appeared in state media, smiling broadly and supporting himself with a cane. While touring the newly built Wisong Scientists Residential District and another new institute in Pyongyang, Kim “took necessary steps with loving care,” a dispatch from the official Korean Central News Agency said in typical fawning style. The North didn’t say when the visit happened, nor did it address the leader’s health.

The bewildering ability to command attention by doing nothing says a lot about the North’s mastery of a propaganda apparatus that puts Kim at the center of everything. Remove for 40 days the sun around which that propaganda spins and the international media, both traditional and social, explode with speculation and rumors.

It also speaks to the fundamental difficulties everyone outside North Korea — academics, government officials, reporters — faces in understanding what’s really happening inside a small, poor, autocratic country that jealously guards its internal workings as it ignores demands by the U.S. and its powerful allies to give up its nuclear bombs.

It is no mistake that the world obsesses about Kim’s extended time off from his usual, seemingly constant series of inspection tours of factories and frontline military bases. Ever since 1948, when Kim’s grandfather, Kim Il Sung, founded the country as a socialist rival to the U.S.-backed South, the Kim family has successfully sold the notion, at home and abroad, that they are North Korea.

The last time Kim had been seen in state media was at a September 3 concert. In the weeks between, he missed several high-profile events that he normally attends. An official documentary released late last month made a single reference to Kim’s “discomfort” and showed video footage from August of him overweight and limping.

Many analysts believe that while Kim may have some health issues, he’s probably not in serious trouble. But many other people wondered while Kim was out of the spotlight.

“Is Kim Jong Un brain dead?” a South Korean lawmaker asked Adm. Choi Yoon-hee, head of the Joint



VANISHING ACT. A man watches a TV news program at the Seoul Railway Station in Seoul, South Korea, showing North Korean leader Kim Jong Un (center) using a cane, reportedly during his first public appearance in five weeks in Pyongyang, North Korea, on Tuesday, October 14, 2014. Kim was said to have toured the newly built Wisong Scientists Residential District and another new institute in Pyongyang, according to state media. (AP Photo/Lee Jin-man)

Chiefs of Staff, during a parliamentary hearing. Choi said no, and, without elaborating, said Kim’s health problems “are not severe enough to disrupt his status as the ruler of the country.”

There were many reasons to believe that even before he reappeared.

No unusual troop movements or other signs of a possible coup have emerged. Diplomacy at the highest level continues: Three members of his inner circle made a surprise visit to the South, something analysts say would be impossible without the leader’s blessing. Foreign tourists and aid workers still travel to the North, and there have been no reports of new restrictions or warnings for diplomats.

There’s also nothing particularly unusual about North Korean leaders laying low for extended periods. Kim’s late father, Kim Jong Il, no fan of the limelight in his later years, would disappear at times; Kim Jong Un, who seems to genuinely like being at the center of things, took off without a word for three weeks in 2012.

But the apparent vanishing act of a man long seen in foreign media as a cartoonish, all-powerful overlord sitting on a nuclear arsenal while his people starve has proven endlessly fascinating. And while there is plenty of informed analysis from experts and frequent visitors to Pyongyang, there seems to be even more thinly sourced speculation.

Kim is, by turns, reported to be suffering from gout, from diabetes, from a brain hemorrhage, from a heart ailment, from a leg injury that required surgery from a French doctor, from mental illness, or, according to a head-turning British report, from a cheese addiction.

North Korea’s completely controlled state media, meanwhile, chugged right along.

Kim is always seen in dispatches as the benevolent wellspring of all that is good and powerful. Archived footage of him plays regularly on state TV.

“Within North Korea, the people feel Kim’s presence even when he is absent,” Scott Snyder, a Korea expert with the Council on Foreign Relations, wrote in a recent blog post. “Externally, North Korean propaganda has made Kim’s presence so critical that international media regard his absence as disquieting, even ... without supporting indicators of instability or upset in Pyongyang.”

Maybe the speculation comes from South Korean officials eager to undercut the Kim family’s legitimacy, Adam Cathcart, a University of Leeds history lecturer, suggested in a recent online post he titled “North Korea Misinformation Bingo” that listed various “theories.” Maybe it’s North Korea’s attempt to change the subject from its human-rights abuse? Maybe it’s “driven by cutthroat competition in the online journalism sector?”

The source is anyone’s guess, Cathcart wrote, but two things are certain: There are lots of rumors floating around, and “most of them are probably wrong.”

Part of the interest in Kim’s absence stems from worries about what would happen to the country if the leader died without securing a succession.

Kim Jong Un emerged as the anointed successor after Kim Jong Il disappeared from public view in 2008 — by most accounts because of a stroke. The elder Kim died in late 2011.

Kim Jong Un’s two older brothers, for whatever reasons, were deemed unfit to rule by Kim Jong Il, and little is known about his sister.

Kim’s disappearance from the public eye “does not appear likely to shake the regime, but it reveals the vulnerabilities the regime faces,” Snyder said.

Kim reportedly does have a direct heir who may one day extend the Kim dynasty into a fourth generation. Probably not soon, though. She’s believed to be a toddler.

Associated Press writer Kim Tong-hyung in Seoul contributed to this report.



LAYERS OF MEANING. In this combination of nine photos taken in August and September 2014 in Yangon and Naypyidaw, from left to right, top row: Myat Ko, an ethnic Naga, wears a traditional Naga hat; Ye Tun, an ethnic Burman, wears a Shan hat; In Phong San, an ethnic Kachin, wears a cane hat with wild bore horns. Middle row, left to right: Army Maj. Soe Moe has five different hats, but doesn’t wear any in parliament; democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi wears flowers; Shwe Maung, an ethnic Rohingya, keeps a soft, brown, tasselled fez-like cap modelled after one worn by Abdul Gaffar, a Rohingya legislator of Myanmar’s first prime minister. Bottom row, left to right: Je Yaw Wu, an ethnic Lisu, wears a cushioned white hat; Aye Maung, an ethnic Rakhine, wears a traditional hat known as Rakhine gaun baung; Saw Thein Aung, an ethnic Karen, wears a scarf in Naypyidaw, Myanmar. Civilians elected to Myanmar’s bicameral legislature are required to wear hats when taking the floor. The Burman majority don a silk turban known as a gaun baun, which has come to symbolize the nascent civilian government. Ethnic minorities wear everything from feathers and claws to tea towels on their heads. (AP Photo/Gemunu Amarasinghe)

In Myanmar parliament, colorful hats cap divisions

Continued from page 2

Previously marginalized, they now find themselves with a little bargaining power and are seeking greater autonomy.

President Thein Sein, a retired general, has promised a ceasefire ahead of the 2015 election. Ethnic armed groups have proven tough negotiators despite clashes between them and government forces, which have continued throughout the stalling peace talks.

Win Htein typifies parliament’s web of paradoxes. A close friend of Suu Kyi and a member of her party, he, too, was a soldier, under socialist dictator Gen. Ne Win.

Win Htein was erroneously accused of being an accomplice in an assassination plot against Ne Win and forced to retire in 1976. In 1988, when a student uprising shook the

government before a military crackdown that left thousands dead, Win Htein joined Suu Kyi’s party and was soon imprisoned. His transition is not dissimilar to Thein Sein’s, from military uniform to gaun baung.

The jovial politician says he tries to avoid meetings with the top leadership, explaining that their relationship is complicated enough.

“I was senior to them when I was in the army,” he says with a mischievous smile, referring to the president and other major players in government. “They call me *ako gyi* (big brother) when we meet.”

If history had gone only slightly differently, Win Htein might himself be a powerful general. Or at least in parliament, he would not have to wear his dreaded hat.

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