

Metro Detroit Koreans hope for better future - David Kasbow

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Joan Moon prays during a monthly service at Korean Methodist Church in Troy. "I believe God has a plan," she said of Kim Jong Il's passing. (Elizabeth Conley / The Detroit News)

Detroit— Reaction among local Korean-Americans and others to the death of North Korea's Kim Jong Il ranged from hope to concern over the future of North Korea.

Kim Jong Il, 69, reportedly died of a heart attack while on a train trip Saturday, the North Korean government announced Sunday.

For Kiyon Ahn, a Metro Detroiter who grew up in Busan, South Korea, but left the country for the United States 36 years ago, the news prompted thoughts about the future of the region and its heir-apparent, Kim Jong Un, the youngest son of Kim Jong Il.

"A lot of people are thinking whether (North Korea) will be better or not better," Ahn said on Monday. "He's too young. He doesn't have enough experience." He is believed to be in his late 20s.

Ahn said although her family is "100 percent" South Korean, she is concerned about those who live in North Korea.

"A lot of people are starving and dying," Ahn said of the country and its isolated regime.

Throughout Metro Detroit, some expressed shock at the death of Kim Jong Il, while others wondered if a change in the North Korean leadership could lead to reunification with South Korea.

Others questioned whether North Korea would continue its nuclear arms program.

There are an estimated 30,000 Korean-Americans in Metro Detroit.

At the Michigan Korean Weekly newspaper, owner Tack-Yong Kim said he was remaking the Ann Arbor-based publication's front page to reflect the longtime leader's death and changes in North Korea.

"It is the news of the week," Kim said "Some people are excited about it. He was the longtime enemy of the South Korean people."

Kim said his 40,000 readers, who also follow the Ann Arbor-based newspaper on the website michigankoreans.com, called Sunday and Monday to discuss the news.

Kim said he is hopeful change will come to North Korea with Kim Jong Un, who was educated in Switzerland. Kim wonders if the new leader's age and influence from Western culture will play a role in how he governs.

"We hope he is a little more open-minded than his father so that he re-opens the dialogue of North and South Korea and the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula," Kim said.

Among the priorities for many local Korean-American families and others is putting a more consistent program into place that will allow families from North and South Korea to reunite.

"Hundreds of thousands of families have been separated by the Korean War," Kim said. "They have not seen one another in 40-60 years."

The Rev. David Kasbow of the Unification Church in Warren said Kim Jong Il's death could be the beginning of a movement toward healing the rift between North and South Korea.

"We're very hopeful that at this point they can sit down together," said Kasbow, whose church is led by the Rev. Sun Myung Moon. "The system is collapsing. The economic dream of North Korea becoming prosperous never came to fruition. It's been quite the opposite."

Kasbow visited South Korea in September, along with four Michigan ministers as part of a 172-minister mission.

Kasbow said his church previously has collected food for villages in North Korea.

Michigan State University professor Dennis Hart, an expert on Korean relations and politics, said Kim Jong Il's death might not spell immediate change in North Korea.

"I don't think the son will go against existing policies," Hart said.

"He first has to reach out to a range of different groups in the government to establish his power. His father and grandfather were proven commodities, but people who supported his father may not be sure of him yet."

Hart, program director of the Visiting International Professionals Program at MSU, said while he doesn't believe North Korea will end its nuclear arms program "it will not use nuclear weapons" unless provoked.

"I don't see any threat," Hart said.

Mugyo Choe, who came to Metro Detroit from South Korea six years ago, said he hopes the change in North Korea's leadership would result in a better life for those living in the country.

Choe said he visited North Korea in 2002 as part of a church group and was struck by the lack of trees in the region.

The land is barren because they are cut down to provide fuel for energy for the country's citizens, Kasbow said.