



Kim Jong Nam's assassination: a Pyongyang palace conspiracy? by Georgy Bulychev

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The conventional wisdom argues that North Korean agents were behind Kim Jong Nam's murder in Malaysia. The prevailing hypothesis is that the assassination was an act of the North Korean government. Let me offer an alternative theory, one that suggests Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un may not have been responsible and is instead another "victim" of the attack.

Imagine a group of high-level North Korean intelligence officials dislike Kim Jong Un and feel threatened. They might also feel that he is betraying the "socialist cause" by economic marketization, undermining the "aristocratic" ruling class, and harming their country by provoking enemies and allies. (These ideological motivations are not a necessary part of the hypothesis, just one possible explanation of why the "aristocrats" may rebel against the "king.")

As intelligence officials, they can conspire and act without being uncovered. Years ago, I would have ridiculed the notion that any covert organized opposition could exist in Pyongyang, but times are changing and Kim Jong Un has created a lot of negative feelings in the ruling class.

Could this group mastermind a high-level attention-grabbing incident to put Kim Jong Un under pressure from forces both inside and outside his country? Domestically, he may come under pressure from the "nomenklatura" and population because he has killed an untouchable figure – a direct "Paektusan bloodline" descendant of the god-like Kim Il Sung – as well as his own elder brother, which in Confucian tradition is bad indeed. Externally, Kim Jong Un will be condemned as a terrorist and criminal in the eyes not only of enemies, but also sponsors and friends (if he has any). For the rest of his life, Kim Jong Un will be an outcast and no world leader would dare shake his hand.

Such a plan would be easy to implement. It could take place under an existing order calling for the elimination of Kim Jong Nam – which may have been issued at the beginning of Kim Jong Un's tenure, when he was afraid of competition from a China-supported pretender. It would make no difference to the plotters that Kim Jong Nam pledged his loyalty and became politically irrelevant.

Field operatives, meanwhile, are not supposed to think about such things. Entrusted with a mission by their commander, whose directive is, in turn, based on a "Supreme Order," (the existence of which might have been known to them), they travel to Malaysia and hire somebody to publicly

spray a substance into a stranger's face. Such instructions don't require inordinate levels of secrecy. The operatives are given a substance of unknown lethality. The embassy is kept in the dark; low-level functionaries are there only to help the operatives leave without trouble. The ambassador's behavior suggests he was unaware of the nature of the incident.

The "conspirators" might have shared the plot with South Korean "colleagues" in Seoul's conservative camp. Another "barbaric act" by the North Korean regime would serve as a useful foil amid the political battles currently underway in Seoul. Some South Koreans and their informers were certainly at the scene (their reports back to Seoul were leaked to the press in a matter of minutes). Some high-level Chinese, unhappy with the Pyongyang regime and wishing to change the "enfant terrible" at its helm, may have been aware of the plot (hence the absence of security around Kim Jong Nam and the fact that the incident took place outside Chinese territory). Most probably, the "conspirators" are already out of the country under South Korean or even US or Chinese protection. Or, they might prefer a kamikaze death for a noble cause.

This explains why Kim Jong Un looked so gloomy and depressed at the public function on the day of his father's birthday, having received such a "present."

Can such a weird theory ever be proved? Pay attention to movements in North Korea's leadership hierarchy in the coming weeks. I do not exclude the possibility that Kim Jong Un, if he succeeds in finding out the truth, may stage an open process to explain the situation. Unfortunately, no one outside the DPRK would believe him.

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