



Marshal Kim Jong Eun and Ri Yong Ho in happier days.  
Picture courtesy Diario de Caracas

*We have two takes on Ri Yong Ho's recent firing and Kim Jong Un's ascension to "Marshal," a rank which, in Western military tradition, is usually associated with wartime experience. Kim's meteoric rise to Marshal rank is another step up toward Juche deification and provides another chapter for the hagiographers. But was the transcendence from Man to Marshal required to consolidate power? Or did we witness already-aggregated power changing states from potential to kinetic? In the following analysis, Nick Miller touches on Ri's "illness" and also briefly looks at a rash of "car accidents". Both are presumptively code words or euphemisms of the kind usually found in opaque organizations the world over. Dr Nicolas Levi offers his take on the matter in a [related article](#). – Roger Cavazos, Coordinator*

### **The Fall of a Man: The Rise of a Marshal**

By: Nick Miller

Given Ri Yong-Ho's possible purge from his positions one must begin to wonder about the further implications for his downfall and what his removal means for Kim Jong Un. In both cases, it would seem that this move only strengthens Kim Jong Eun's hand.

[Ri sudden removal](#) came as a surprise. He was one of the younger members of the gerontocracy, being only 69 years old. One of his last official sightings was as head of an official KPA delegation from [May 8 – 11 to Laos](#) indicating that he was trusted enough to travel abroad. He was number 4 (maybe a clue in hindsight?) of the "[Gang of Eight](#)" at Kim Jong Il's funeral party. Ri played a critical role in the succession process for Kim Jong Un. He also [led the parade](#) to mark the 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the founding of the Korean People's Army (KPA) on April 25, 2012. Kim Jong Il showed his trust in Ri by [promoting him to Vice-Marshal](#) and Vice-Chair of the Worker's Party of Korea (WPK) at the same time as Kim Jong Un was elevated to General.

**Illness and "Traffic Accidents"** | Ri was officially relieved of all his positions because of "illness," but terms like "illness" and the "car accidents" that claimed so many officials are just codewords from the North Korean regime for being purged.[\[1\]](#)

Ri Yong-Ho's removal is not the first time in recent years elites have mysteriously disappeared. Several more intriguing North Korean cases emerge from North Korea in a report from [Amnesty International](#) claiming that thirty officials were purged by the Ministry of State Security (국가안전보위부) after the death of Kim Jong Il. All of them were involved in talks with South Korea and all suffered from "traffic accidents".

The statistical probability of all thirty officials succumbing to "traffic accidents" in such a short period of time asymptotically approaches zero. However, North Korea has always been one to defy the odds. It was not uncommon for bureaucrats who were seen as failing the regime to be removed. In 2010 [Pak Nam-gi](#), former head of the finance department of the WKP, was executed by the government after leading a for the currency reform debacle that resulted in inflation and worsening food shortages. Unsurprisingly, no one in North Korea has seriously taken up economic reform duties since then. Pak's death and the deaths of the thirty officials that Amnesty reported were more than likely scapegoats of higher elites. One of the problems when relying on these reports is the difficulty in verifying the claims.



Hyon Yong Chol spreading the word of Marshal Kim Jong Eun shortly after being named Chief of the General Staff.  
Picture courtesy Kyodo.

**Power Struggle, Power Consolidation** | Power struggle is likely the most plausible reason for Ri's removal of power. [Kim Kwang In](#), at North Korea Strategy Center, viewed the official explanation regard Ri with skepticism citing that Cho Myung Rok, the former director of the People's Army General Political Department was in poor health and was not removed until he died.

The most probable explanation for Ri's removal was the fact that he was known to be one of the most ardent military first policy supporters with the strength to stop any reforms from occurring within North Korea. Perhaps he voiced his objection to the potential reform plans of [Jang Song Thaek](#) and this was the right time for Jang and his allies to remove a critical piece of Kim Jong Il's legacy to allow necessary reforms to spring forth in North Korea. Jang was believed to be one of the strongest proponents for economic reforms in North Korea and that could have played a reason for his own purge in the early 2000s. This theory seems to be the most likely reason as to

why Ri was removed from his positions as North Korean watchers have also seen [Pak Pong Ju](#), former Prime Minister and his deputy [Roh Du Cheol](#), and [Choi Ryong Hae](#) return to positions within North Korea. Pak was removed from power over his attacks against the military and desire to initiate economic reforms but is now managing the Party Light Industry Department.

During a [discussion](#) at the launch of his latest impressive [publication](#) on North Korea's vast and invasive security organization Ken Gause remarked that Ri's downfall can be attributed to the fact that Kim Jong Un was already giving signals that he wanted to move away from military first policy of his father. Gause cited a line from [Kim Jong Un's first public speech](#) that North Korea would not have to "tighten its belt again" saying that was a coded phrase meaning "military first policy". In the same speech Kim Jong Un did address the need to adhere to the military first policy but that no longer could the international community blackmail North Korea with nuclear weapons. With North Korea's desire for securing nuclear capability now affirmed and enshrined in their constitution, the new leadership could be simply be stating that Kim Jong Il's nuclear legacy is secure and that the time to pursue new goals has arrived.

**Military Jockeying** | The military was going to be the biggest threat to initiating reforms within North Korea and to the young Kim Jong Un. Cheong Seong Chang, at the Sejong Institute, remarked that until Kim Jong Un's [recent elevation](#) to Marshal, he was lower than his senior officials. This very publicly promulgated promotion further secured his grip over the military. This was affirmed by [Kim Kwang In](#) saying that now that Kim Jong Un was at the center of power within North Korea as he commanded the Party, the Politburo, and the military.

In socialist societies, the clearest sign of power is the one person sitting atop the triune organs: the gun, the Party, and the Politburo. The purge of Ri Yong Ho and the promotion of Hyun Yong Chol to Ri's position was likely meant to show the other elites that young Kim wields the power now. Kim Jong Un has been seen many times after demonstrating how deeply he cared about Ri's health by issuing a terse statement to allow him to focus on his health. Ri has not been seen or heard from since then.

Whether economic or political reform will be coming to North Korea is still too soon to call according to [Daniel Pinkston](#), at the International Crisis Group, who believes that North Korea still needed to make real structural changes to the political system before analysts can say reforms are actually occurring.

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**Full Essay in pdf:** [Nicholas Miller on "Fall of a Man: Rise of a Marshal"](#)

### **Additional Reading:**

Peter Hayes, Scott Bruce, and David von Hippel, "[Kim Jong Il's Death Suggests Continuity Plus Opportunity to Engage.](#)" *Nautilus Institute*, 12/19/2011

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[1] In Chinese, "mental illness 精神病" is diagnosis, epithet and code word all wrapped together. The most recent cases have required "vacation style treatment" and have become a common Chinese netizen meme.