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Some in Mass. worry about instability in North Korea

By Matt Rocheleau, Evan Allen and Jenna Duncan | GLOBE CORRESPONDENTS DECEMBER 19, 2011

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“With this political upheaval they’re going to be very anxious and sensitive,” said Stephen Bosworth, dean of Tufts’ Fletcher School and a former special envoy to N. Korea.

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To a former US diplomat and students from South Korea attending Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the death of Kim Jong Il was seen as an opportunity for historic change, but also the beginning of an unstable political environment, the outcome of which no one can reliably predict.

Ingwon Chae, the secretary of MIT’s Korean Students Association, said yesterday that the death of the dictator came as a shock, even though Kim Jong Il has been reported to be sick for months. For him, it has also created a hopeful moment.

“I’d like to see a unified Korea again, one nation under one flag,” Chae said in a telephone interview. “It’s always been an abstraction in my mind. It might not even happen in my lifetime. But when Kim Jong Il dies, that immediately starts invoking those emotions again - this could happen a lot sooner than you think.”

Ambassador Stephen W. Bosworth, a former special envoy to North Korea, said last night that Kim Jong Il's death was not a huge surprise to Korea watchers because of the dictator's illness.

Bosworth served as the US special representative to North Korea from February 2009 until two months ago, when he stepped down and Ambassador Glyn Davies was named his successor.

Bosworth, who is dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University in Medford, is confident that the United States and other countries with intense interest in North Korea will be vigilant in coming weeks.

"It's a difficult time in terms of North Korean policy. I think [the United States] will work with South Korea and China and Japan to make sure this situation is not disruptive to that region," he said.

He added that while few details are known about North Korea's leadership succession plan, it is widely believed that Kim's third son, Kim Jong Un, will become head of state because his father appointed him as his successor in September 2010.

"We're going to have to be careful," Bosworth said. "North Korea is a serious problem under all circumstances, and now with this political upheaval they're going to be very anxious and sensitive."

Jim Walsh, a researcher at MIT's Security Studies Program, focuses his work on nuclear weapons, nonproliferation, and terrorism and has traveled to both North Korea and Iran to talk to officials from each country about nuclear issues.

"The bad news is that North Korea is going to be on the defensive," he said by telephone last night. "It's going to be more focused inward instead of outward on the rest of the region. North Korea is going to be wondering if people will try to take advantage of this moment of transition."

He said other countries should "stop, take a break, and give North Korea some breathing room."

Chae's friend and fellow MIT student Edward Kim has three more days to decide if he will begin boot camp for the South Korean army to fulfill his two-year mandatory service in the Republic of Korea's army.

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He has the opportunity to postpone the enlistment, but said in an e-mail, “I want to serve my duty to protect my country and family regardless of what Korean relations dictates.”

His parents and younger sister, who are all currently at their home in Seoul, seem more concerned about his possible enlistment than with the news of Kim Jong Il’s death.

“When I called my parents, they were both very startled” about the dictator’s death, he said, “but they were more worried for me because I had already made this decision. They’re nervous I’m joining boot camp at what could be the worst possible time for a Korean soldier.”

Kim said both of his parents work in the financial industry and they have heard rumors about potential military threats and some talk that people are refusing to go to work or school.


But the sentiment in his homeland seems to be shock.

“It’s a huge deal for anyone that’s Korean and especially anyone studying abroad because all of my family is in Korea,” Kim said. “I don’t feel bad personally, just because he’s our national enemy.”

He added, “I’m not celebrating in the way my American friends are . . . South Koreans understand this isn’t a good thing because it opens up so many doors for bad things to happen.”

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