

Assassination of Kim Jong-nam

On Feb 13, Kim Jong-nam, the stepbrother of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, was killed at Kuala Lumpur international airport.¹ CCTV footage shows two women approaching Kim and covering his face with what Malaysian police claims was the nerve agent VX.² Kim died on the way to the hospital.³

The two female suspects were arrested.⁴ A Vietnamese national was taken into custody when she returned to the crime scene two days later.⁵ She told the police that she had been approached by four men to partake in a prank.⁶ Another Indonesian female who was arrested testified that she thought she was participating in a reality television show.⁷

According to Malaysian authorities, they believe a total of ten individuals, including the two women, were involved in the assassination. The four North Koreans recruiters left Malaysia immediately after the incident and returned to Pyongyang on Feb 17 via Dubai and Vladivostok.⁸ Ri Jong Chol, a North Korean national who is suspected of being the driver, was arrested⁹ along with a Malay in his 30s.¹⁰ Based on CCTV footage,¹¹ the police are searching for two additional suspects, a North Korean embassy official, and an airline worker.¹²

On Feb 15, Prime Minister Hwang Kyo-ahn convened the National Security Committee (NSC) to discuss the incident. He labeled the assassination an “inhumane criminal act” and a “terrorist act.”¹³ Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se suggested that North Korea may have violated Malaysia’s sovereignty.¹⁴ Lim Sung-nam, 1st Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, announced that Korea and the U.S. will continue to discuss the possibility of reinstating North Korea as a state sponsor of terrorism.¹⁵ A bill has already been introduced in the US House of Representatives calling for such a move.

On the other hand, North Korea has accused the South of conspiring with the Malaysian government

to defame the North Korean regime.¹⁶ The North Korean Ambassador to Malaysia insisted that Kim died of natural causes¹⁷ and that the South was using the incident to push ahead with the THAAD deployment.¹⁸

Constitutional Court

The Constitutional Court (CC) announced the final deposition date as Feb 27.¹⁹ This would allow the CC approximately two weeks to formulate and issue its opinion. Park's team has been trying to push the ruling date past Mar 13, but the CC appears determined to make the final decision before that date.

There was some speculation that President Park may resign before the ruling but this option is not likely according to an unnamed source within the Blue House.²⁰ There was also some speculation about President Park taking the stand to testify at the CC. This has also been ruled out as of Feb 26. The National Assembly impeachment committee has already submitted its final statement on Feb 23 as requested by the CC.²¹

Special Prosecutors

The Special Prosecutors (SP) have reached a dead end with respect to their investigation of the Blue House. They have failed to obtain an arrest warrant for Woo Byung-woo and they have failed to indict President Park. Instead, the SP has announced that they will not indict President Park as long as she has the presidential privilege.²²

However, the SP was more successful with regards to their investigation of Samsung. The court approved the arrest of Lee Jay-yong, the vice president of Samsung Electronics, on Feb 17. Lee has since been summoned five times. The SP sees Lee JY's conviction as a key stepping stone to prove Choi Soon-sil and President Park's guilt.²³ The SP is reportedly planning to indict Lee on Feb 27, a day before the end of its investigation.²⁴

The SP has also requested an extension of their investigation, which is set to expire on Feb 28. Prime Minister Hwang has not approved this request and appears inclined not to do so.²⁵ The National Assembly also failed to amend the SP Act, which would have also extended the investigation.²⁶ Given the circumstance, the SP may have no choice but to conclude the investigation as scheduled. The Prosecution Service is preparing to take over the investigation and planning to hire the same prosecutors and investigators on the SP team.²⁷

2017 Presidential Election

Preparations for the upcoming presidential election are underway. The Constitutional Court (CC) is expected to make a ruling on President Park's impeachment by Mar 10. If the CC upholds the National Assembly's impeachment decision, the presidential election must take place within 60 days. The date must also be announced 50 days prior to the election, which means that election may take place sometime between Apr 29 and May 9. Election usually takes place on a Wednesday but given the number of national holidays during the first week of May, there is a possibility that it may be held on May 9. If the government decides that Wednesday is still the best day to hold the election, the date may even be pulled up to Apr 26.

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|--------|-------------------------------|
| Apr 29 | Saturday |
| Apr 30 | Sunday |
| May 1 | Labor Day (Monday) |
| May 3 | Buddha's Birthday (Wednesday) |
| May 5 | Children's Day (Friday) |
| May 6 | Saturday |
| May 7 | Sunday |
| May 9 | Tuesday |

A number of individuals have announced their candidacy even though only a handful are considered serious contenders. According to recent public polls, Moon Jae-in (33%) and Ahn Hee-jung (22%), from the Together Democratic Party (TDP) lead the pack. Four of the top five candidates are from major opposition parties. Prime Minister and acting-president Hwang Kyo-ahn is the lone contender from the conservative side, although he has yet to make an announcement. Many observers speculate that Prime Minister Hwang's number will drop if the CC decides to remove President Park from power.

Presidential Candidate Approval Ratings

| Candidate | Party | Feb. 14-16 ²⁸ | Feb. 21-23 ²⁹ |
|--------------------|-------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Moon Jae-in | TDP | 33% | 32% |
| Ahn Hee-jung | TDP | 22% | 21% |
| Hwang Kyo-ahn | FKP | 9% | 8% |
| Ahn Cheol-soo | PP | 9% | 8% |
| Lee Jae-myung | TDP | 5% | 8% |
| Yoo Seong-min | RP | 2% | 2% |
| Sohn Hak-kyu | PP | 1% | - |
| Other | - | 2% | 2% |
| Don't know/refused | - | 18% | 19% |

How do you evaluate Prime Minister Hwang Kyo-ahn's performance as acting president?³⁰

| | |
|---------------------|-----|
| Performing well | 33% |
| Not performing well | 56% |
| Neither | 4% |
| Don't know/refused | 7% |

The TDP has begun registering voters for the upcoming party primary as of Feb 15. Any Korean national, regardless of party affiliation, is eligible to vote as long as he/she registers. The initial registration period will last for three weeks. Another registration period will begin on the day of the CC decision and last for one week.³¹

On Feb 20, the Righteous Party (RP) announced that its primary election results will be determined by a combination of public opinion (40%), party members (25%), registered voters (25%), and mobile texts (10%). The party will announce the winner on Mar 24.³²

The PP has announced that it will announce its primary rules by Mar 13³³ while the Freedom Korea Party (FKP) will elect its candidate forty days prior to the presidential election.³⁴

Party Approval Ratings

| Date | Feb 14-16 ³⁵ | Feb 21-23 ³⁶ |
|--------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| TDP | 44% | 44% |
| FKP | 11% | 10% |
| PP | 12% | 12% |
| RP | 6% | 6% |
| JP | 3% | 3% |
| Don't know/refused | 23% | 26% |

- 1 “北 김정남, 말레이시아에서 피살,” *조선일보*, 2017년 2월 14일.
- 2 “말레이 경찰 ‘김정남 주검서 신경성 독가스 VX 검출,’” *한겨레*, 2017년 2월 24일.
- 3 “여성 2명, 무인 발권기 앞 김정남 습격 후 도주... 金, 도움 요청한 뒤 쓰러져... 병원 이송중 사망,” *조선일보*, 2017년 2월 16일.
- 4 “김정남 살해 용의자 여성 2명 모두 체포,” *경향신문*, 2017년 2월 16일.
- 5 “김정남 암살 일당 6명... ‘LOL 여성’은 체포,” *조선일보*, 2017년 2월 16일.
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- 8 “‘김정남 암살’ 용의자 17일 평양 도착, 아랍에미리트-두바이-러시아 경유 평양행...96시간 동안 우회 예상,” *조선일보*, 2017년 2월 20일.
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- 12 “북 대사관 직원, 김정남 살해 용의자 4명 평양행 도왔다,” *한겨레*, 2017년 2월 23일.
- 13 “황교안 ‘김정남 피살 사건, 반인륜적 범죄행위이자 테러행위,’” *경향신문*, 2017년 2월 20일.
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- 34 “자유한국당, 선거 40일 전 대선 후보 결정,” *중앙일보*, 2017년 2월 15일.
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