

North Korean leader has so far executed 70 officials

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Seoul, South Korea: Young North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has executed 70 officials since taking power in late 2011 in a "reign of terror" that far exceeds the bloodshed of his dictator father's early rule, South Korean officials said Thursday.

South Korean Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se, at a forum in Seoul, compared Kim Jong Un's 70 executions with those of his late father, Kim Jong Il, who he said executed about 10 officials during his first years in power.

An official from South Korea's National Intelligence Service, who refused to be named, citing office rules, confirmed that the spy agency believes the younger Kim has executed about 70 officials but wouldn't reveal how it obtained the information.

Yun also said that the younger Kim's "reign of terror affects significantly" North Koreans working overseas by inspiring them to defect to the South, but he also didn't reveal how he got the details.

North Korea, an authoritarian nation ruled by the Kim family since its founding in 1948, is secretive about its government's inner workings, and information collected by outsiders is often impossible to confirm.

High-level government purges have a long history in North Korea.

To strengthen his power, Kim Jong Un's grandfather, North Korea founder Kim Il Sung, removed pro-Soviet and pro-Chinese factions within the senior leadership in the years after the 1950-53 Korean War. The high-ranking victims included Pak Hon Yong, formerly the vice chairman of the ruling Workers' Party of Korea and the country's foreign minister, who was executed in 1955 after being accused of spying for the United States.

Kim Jong Un has also removed key members of the old guard through a series of purges since taking over after the death of Kim Jong Il. The most spectacular purge to date was the 2013 execution of his uncle, Jang Song Thaek, for alleged treason. Jang was married to Kim Jong Il's sister and was once considered the second most powerful man in North Korea.

South Korea's spy agency told lawmakers in May that Kim ordered his then-defense chief Hyon Yong Chol executed with an anti-aircraft gun for complaining about the young ruler, talking back to him and sleeping during a meeting.

Experts say Kim could be using fear to solidify his leadership, but those efforts could fail if he doesn't improve the country's shattered economy.

- AP