

N. Korea to hold parliamentary elections in March

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USPA News - North Korea will hold parliamentary elections in the second week of March, marking the country's first election since Kim Jong-un was promoted to Supreme Leader following the death of his father in December 2011, state-run media reported on Wednesday. A brief dispatch from the state-run Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) said the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly had decided to hold an election on March 9 to elect deputies for North Korea's 13th parliament.

The 12th and current parliament was formed in 2009 and consists of 687 legislators. "The Presidium of the DPRK Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) decided to hold an election of deputies to the 13th SPA on March 9, Juche 103 (2014), according to Article 90 of the Socialist Constitution of the DPRK," KCNA said in its report, referring to the country's official name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. "The decision was promulgated on Tuesday." The election in March will be the first for leader Kim Jong-un, who took over to lead the impoverished and secretive country in December 2011 after his father, Kim Jong-il, died of a heart attack. Foreign experts and observers believe the elections may signal possible changes in the country's power elite under the new leadership. North Koreans last went to the ballot box in July 2011 to 'elect' deputies to provincial, city and county assemblies. But voters who showed up had little choice but to vote for 'candidates' who were already selected for them by the ruling party, with the government reporting a 99.97 percent turnout among registered voters and those on the ballots receiving 100 percent of the vote. Dutch stamp dealer Willem van der Bijl, who was briefly detained and accused of being a spy in 2011 during his 24th trip to the country, provided a unique insight into the election process in a 2012 interview with NK News, an independent American news website that focuses on events in North Korea. Van der Bijl appeared in a posting on the website of the state-run Pyongyang Times newspaper after the elections took place and seemed to praise the process. "Looking round the poll, I have been greatly impressed by the free and democratic elections and I have had a better understanding of the DPRK's reality," he was quoted as saying in the report, that later turned out to be partially fabricated. The stamp dealer told NK News that he had visited a polling station on election day and told North Korean journalists that the experience had given him a "totally new view" on how elections are held in North Korea, and that he was "surprised" to see how the country's system works. "This was an ironic comment - in my view - on what I had seen," he said. "From their point of view, a foreigner who says he is surprised, etc., and if you miss the ironic undertone, it is a perfect piece of propaganda. Later I found out my 'interview' is on the internet as well, and even signed by me, with what is indeed my signature, as a scan from my passport." Van der Bijl described a process in which voters have little choice but to vote in favor of the pre-selected candidate. "The voter is allowed to take a piece of paper from one of the piles at the table, in front of the officials, and visible to everybody in the room," he said. "The paper is, per pile, colored green or red, and it is your 'free' choice as to whichever color you like. After you took, in front of everybody, your - green, I hope - piece of paper, you ... are able to put it in a box." In North Korea, all residents are legally required to vote during elections unless they have left the country with permission or if they work at sea. A similar process to what Van der Bijl described has also been reported in which voters are able to vote against the selected candidate by picking up a red pen, but doing so is known to result immediate arrest and severe punishment.

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