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Analysis of North Korea's Elections to the Provincial, City, and County People's Assemblies

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2023 Elections for the Local People's Assemblies

On November 26, Elections to the Provincial (municipal), City (district), and County People's Assemblies (hereafter local elections) were held. The local people's assemblies are regional sovereign institutions composed of deputies elected every four years, serving as the local legislative bodies in the North Korean system. The elections this time are the first held since the revision of North Korea's election law¹⁾. In accordance with the tradition, Kim, Jong-un voted at a polling station at the Ryongsong Machine Complex in South Hamgyong Province along with the local leadership. There are three key features of the local elections. First, is a decrease in voter turnout. According to data compiled by Central Election Guidance Committee of North Korea, 99.63% of voters participated in the elections. This represents a 0.35%p decrease compared to the final voter turnout of 99.98% recorded on July 21, 2019. Second,

¹⁾ North Korea's election law was revised, but the full text is not yet available. However, according to *Minju Choson*, the official newspaper of North Korea's cabinet, published on November 8, 2023, some revisions were made to allow for multiple candidates for deputies in some districts and to select the final candidates through electoral meetings with the participation of the general public.

is the emphasis on people's participation such as the determination of final candidates through electoral meetings involving local residents. Third, is a move to enhance the accountability of local officials through the election of new deputies.

Implications of a Decline in Voter Turnout: Signs of Weakening State Control

In a liberal democratic system, elections are a mechanism through which people elect representatives who can represent their interests and needs. In contrast, North Korea's elections traditionally follow a system where individuals capable of faithfully executing the missions set forth by the Workers' Party are selected, undergo the Party's qualification assessment, and then are approved by the residents. Votes are cast for or against candidates, and it is a 'festival' of sort, with mandatory participation and celebration by the entire people. For North Koreans, elections are perceived as a duty rather than a right. Therefore, the voter turnout in North Korean elections in the past was typically around 99.98%, a figure rarely seen in liberal democratic systems. The main reason behind this is the mandatory nature of electoral participation imposed on residents, and the continuous implementation of the mobile ballot system²⁾ for "voters unable to go to the polling stations due to old age or military service."

However, the voter turnout for the local elections was 99.63%. Based on a simple calculation of approximately 25 million North Koreans being eligible voters, and compared to the final turnout of 99.98% on July 21, 2019, this means -0.35%p or approximately 87,500 people did not take part in the vote. According to the North Korean authorities, "voters who are in foreign nations or working at seas could not participate in the elections³⁾." However, this factor has been persistent in the past, and considering the current strict border control and the policy trends of repatriating individuals abroad, it is difficult to attribute the decrease in voter turnout to this cause.

Then what are the implications of the low voter turnout? It indicates a small increase

²⁾ *Korean Central News Agency*, November 27, 2023.

³⁾ "99.63% of Eligible Voters Participated in the Elections to the Provincial, City and County People's Assemblies," *Rodong Sinmun*, November 27, 2023.

in the number of residents that cannot be controlled by the North Korean authorities. Since there is no freedom of movement in North Korea, elections traditionally serve as an occasion to compile a list of voters to verify their residency status. While compiling the voter registry⁴⁾, the authorities identify and track residents who made a fraudulent or unauthorized movement to control and manage them. Therefore, those whose names are registered on the list participate in the voting process to demonstrate that they are law-abiding and faithful. Thus, the decline in voter turnout in the face of this system suggests a small increase in the number of residents who are not being controlled by the North Korean authorities. In other words, there is a possibility that the authorities' control over the residents may have been somewhat weakened compared to the past.

People's Participation in the Process of Candidate Selection

While preparing for the upcoming local elections, the North Korean authorities kept on emphasizing in various ways⁵⁾ the 'people first principle' promoted by Kim, Jong-un through *Rodong Sinmun*, the organ of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea, and various educational programs throughout November this year. In summarizing the local elections, it stated that "the new amendments and supplementation of the laws governing elections for people's assemblies at all levels provided another solid legal guarantee for consolidating people's democratic rights and more thoroughly implementing the 'people first principle,' and highlighted that elections are the residents' 'sacred right'⁶⁾. The full text of North Korea's revised elections law has not yet been made publicly available. Nevertheless, the preparations for the elections reveal subtle changes.

The elections represent a departure from previous elections, with an emphasis on the people's participation, including the determination of final candidates through

4) All eligible citizens residing in the competent region are registered in the voter registry, and it contains the name, gender, date of birth, and exact place of birth.

5) Editorial, "Let's Welcome the Local Elections with Strong Political Enthusiasm and Achievements," *Rodong Sinmun*, November 8, 2023, p. 1.

6) "Explosion of Intense Aspirations to Establish our Revolutionary Sovereignty as the Foundation to bring Great Honor to our Country," *Rodong Sinmun*, November 27, 2023, p. 3.

electoral meetings involving residents from each region. Specifically, residents are encouraged to participate in the candidate verification process. In the 2020 laws governing elections for people's assemblies at all levels, which is before the revision, there was possibility of resident participation in candidate nomination but not in the verification process⁷⁾. However, in the process of implementing the revised election law, North Korean authorities actively conducted electoral meetings for the qualification review of deputy candidates. They report that during these meetings, not only officials within the electoral districts but also workers participated, “engaging in a fair review and evaluation of whether the deputy candidates possessed sufficient qualifications as representatives of the people, based on the candidates’ backgrounds, achievements, eligibility criteria, and the opinions of the electorate.” They also advertise that through this process, “deputy candidates among dedicated workers and laborers approved by the largest number of voters were registered⁸⁾.”

Due to the characteristics of North Korea's election system which emphasize nomination and congratulation through consensus, it appears that multiple candidates for deputies were not registered. As evident from the provision in Article 42 of the 2020 election law (number of deputy candidates to be registered in one electoral district) which states “there is no restriction on the number of candidates to be registered in one electoral district for the election of deputies to people's assemblies at all levels,” it can be observed that there was no legal limitation on the number of candidates even in the past. The practice of for-against voting for a single candidate

⁷⁾ The relevant provisions of the 2020 Local Election Law are as follows: Article 35 (Deputy Candidate Nominator) Candidates for the people's assemblies at all levels shall be nominated by the electors or jointly or individually recommended by political parties and social organizations. Nominators must inform the relevant district election committee of the candidates they recommended. Article 37 (Electoral Meeting for Qualification Review of Deputy Candidates) The electoral meetings for the qualification review of deputy candidates shall be held in the residents' area of residence or institutions, business establishments, collective farms, schools and military units. The electoral meetings may include recommended deputy candidates. Article 38 (Contents of Qualification Review for Deputy Candidates) During the electoral meetings for the qualification review for deputy candidates, the name, gender, age, area of residence, political party, social organization, position in the workplace, and career shall be introduced. The participating electors shall deliberate on whether the recommended deputy candidates possess the qualifications as a representative of the people.

⁸⁾ “Electoral Meetings Underway for Qualification Review of Deputy Candidates at Each District,” *Korean Central News Agency*, November 9, 2023.

seems to have continued in the current elections. Nevertheless, North Korean authorities' will to learn about public opinion was expressed in various ways. This is presumed to be part of a broader effort to address discontent among North Korea residents stemming from this year's extensive mobilization efforts and control measures.

Emphasis on Discipline and Accountability among Officials

In the current local elections, Kim, Jong-un regime's intentions to increase accountability of local officials through the election are also noticeable. This is also evident in the instructions he gave while coordinating the elections, where he said "officials of the Party and the government must devote themselves to the revitalization of the country and the realization of the people's interests⁹⁾." In the run-up to the elections, Kim, Jong-un already raised the issue of 'competence' of the officials, saying "the challenges and trials before the revolutionary cause, the construction of a powerful nation entrusted to the current generation requires individuals to exhibit outstanding business capabilities, enthusiasm and dedication." He further emphasized that "in today's unwavering march forward, no stagnation or deviation is tolerated, and officials must be strategic planners who successfully lead unit projects with clear directions for development and step-by-step plans that are in line with the central party's strategic and tactical considerations¹⁰⁾."

This is a measure aimed at regulating and further increasing accountability for officials connecting the Party and the leader to the public. Particularly, given the significant gap between the central and local areas in North Korea due to Kim, Jong-un's Pyongyang-centric policies over the past decade, there is an effort to increase the accountability of local officials who are responsible for 'autonomy and self-reliance.' The duties and powers of North Korea's Local People's Assemblies, which are sovereign institutions at the local level, include the following: first, deliberation and

⁹⁾ "Participation of Officials of the Party and the Government in Elections to the Provincial, City, and County People's Assemblies," *Rodong Sinmun*, November 27, 2023, p. 3.

¹⁰⁾ Editorial, "Officials Must be Competent and Confident in Fulfilling Their Obligations before the Party and the Country," *Rodong Sinmun*, November 27, 2023, p. 1.

approval of local economic plan development and execution; second, deliberation and approval of local budget and execution; third, establishment of measures to enforce national laws in the region; fourth, election for or summoning of the competent local people's assembly's chairman, vice-chairman, secretary, and members; fifth, election for or summoning of the competent court's judge and lay judges; and six, annulment of erroneous decisions or instructions of the relevant local people's committee and lower-level people's assemblies.

The deputies concurrently hold positions responsible for managing local economics and the lives of local residents. Therefore, especially in the current situation where the Kim, Jong-un regime is heavily concentrating on the development of advanced strategic weapons and strengthening of defense capabilities, local provinces must support the central government through poverty and sacrifice while addressing various issues at the local level. In order to prevent abuse of power by officials responsible for such tasks and to mitigate public unrest, there is a need to enhance discipline and increase accountability among officials at various levels. The local elections recently held were a project aimed at electing officials at the local level capable of fulfilling such tasks. ©KINU 2023

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