

The Upcoming North Korean Party Delegates' Conference: Power Sharing among the High Elites in the Kim Jong Eun Era

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Background Reasons for this Party Delegates' Conference

North Korea's next Party Delegates' Conference is scheduled to convene in mid-April. Only a year and seven months have passed since the last such conference was held, in September 2010. It is extremely unusual for the North to hold such an event again after such a brief interval. It was none other than Kim Jong Il himself who decided to restore the various organs of the Central Party through the Party Delegates' Conference in 2010. After the death of Kim Jong Il, the current leadership including Kim Jong Eun has decided to convene a Party Delegates' Conference once again. This seems to show that the current leadership intends to follow Kim Jong Il's decision to place greater emphasis on the organs of the Central Party. If this is the case, why would Kim Jong Il want to restore the party organs in the first place?

The bottom line is that the restoration and reinforcement of the party organs not only enables power-sharing between Kim Jong Eun and the North Korean elites, but also increases the North Korean elites' vested interests in the stability and survival of the Kim Jong Eun regime. If

these goals are realized, the tension between Kim Jong Eun and the governing elites will diminish, helping him to overcome the obstacles to the further stability and survival of the regime. In this regard, it seems that an implicit or explicit agreement was reached between Kim Jong Il, Kim Jong Eun and the governing North Korean elites. Otherwise, it would have been impossible to reach such an unprecedented decision to convene another Party Delegates' Conference after such a short interval of time.

This paper describes the two different opinions among North Korea experts concerning the outlook for the Kim Jong Eun regime after the death of Kim Jong Il, and then presents a new outlook based on the points presented. One prediction is that, because Kim Jong Eun was designated as successor based on his lineage much like a crown prince in a monarchy, his position has already been made as solid as Kim Jong Il's was. Thus, the Kim Jong Eun regime has already stabilized, and will continue to grow more entrenched in the future. The other argument is that in the absence of Kim Jong Il as a strong supporter, the status of Kim Jong Eun will become extremely unstable, resulting sooner or later in a power struggle among the North Korean leadership. As a result, the expectation is that politics in the North will grow increasingly unstable.

The Theory that the Kim Jong Eun Regime Has Already Stabilized

Those who hold this opinion seem to overestimate Kim Jong Eun, while undestimating the North Korean elites. This prediction fails to take into account the dramatic changes that have occurred in the North Korean political system functions as well as the power relationships between the new leader and the governing elites. North Korea today is an entirely different country than it was in the 1970s and 1980s, and it must be understood that the reigning leader can no longer fully control the elites within a ruling coalition as he did in the past. One figurative example of this is the recent disappearance of the draconian "Ten Grand Principles of the Unitary Ideology," which have been central to shore up the absolutism of the Leader.

Though the effects have varied by area, the major current trends can be summarized as follows: a weakening of central authority and control following the collapse of government finances; a strengthening of departmentalism brought on by the promotion of financial self support of public organs; a growing money-first over power or both power and money-first tendency due to market expansion and individual enrichment endeavors; fading interest in the ruling ideology and mystification of the leader; expanding corruption and selling of public positions;

the prevalence of cronyism based on a hierarchical bribery system; and increasing conflicts of interest and veiled enmity among institutions both horizontally as well as vertically, due to a general weakening of the party-state center's political authority, surveillance, and coordinating capacities. It is true that the reigning leader still retains the means to threaten the ultimate downfall of individual elites, if necessary. However, as these trends have progressed throughout the Kim Jong Il era since 1995, the intensity of the leader's control and surveillance system as well as its effectiveness in controlling individual elites have weakened.

Amid weakening central controls and changes in the relationship between the regime and individuals, major institutions and key figures in the North Korean leadership have established an economic base and accompanying power base that are considerably more independent than before. Thus it has reached a level where the reigning leader cannot ignore the aforementioned changes. If Kim Jong Eun, as the new North Korean leader, wishes to wield undisputed authority as Kim Jong Il did in the past, he must restore the complicated system of internal control and surveillance that existed in the 1970s and 1980s, and also secure absolute, exclusive rights to distribute wealth and privileges. Unfortunately, it would be impossible for him to restore this power completely.

The Theory of Inevitable Internal Power Struggles

The second dominant viewpoint perceives that Kim Jong Eun has not yet consolidated a high status comparable with Kim Jong Il and thus there will inevitably be unrest and conflicts among the North Korean elites. As a rule, considering the secretive nature of political processes in autocratic countries like North Korea, there have always been mutual suspicions and unease among the leader and surrounding governing elites. Dictators are more often overthrown through a mutiny by the surrounding elites rather than through a popular uprising, and governing elites must remain vigilant against any possibility of the dictator using his superior status to clandestinely expand power and impinge on their interests. If the dictator succeeds in expanding his/her power, the neighboring elites will have no choice but to show unconditional obedience and leave their personal destinies to the dictator. By contrast, if a dictator's power is weakened and a coalition of elites gains influence, the dictator may be ousted from power as a result. Thus, the dictator and his subordinates remain mutually suspicious and continually watch each other. As early as the mid to late 1960s North Korea established a system in which the dictator has a position of absolute advantage over his subordinates.

Once the dictator has established this position of absolute advantage, there is little possibility of a military rebellion by subordinates, generally considered the greatest threat to regime stability. In other cases a leader's fall is often brought on by either a popular uprising or outside interference, but in the case of North Korea both are far less likely than a subordinates' revolt. Kim Jong Il kept his subordinates under his thumb through a variety of mechanisms and maintained a supreme position over all the governing elites. This was possible partly due to inertia. Nevertheless, it would be much more difficult or even impossible for Kim Jong Eun to achieve the same level of power as his father, since the various mechanisms are unlikely to function as effectively as in the past. More importantly, Kim Jong Eun's own capability to lead his country is untested. This changing situation has raised mutual suspicions and watchfulness between the dictator and his subordinates to the much higher level than before. If a power struggle erupts between the two, it is highly likely that both parties may indeed fall together.

Reusing the Central Party Organs: A Plan for Stable Power Sharing between the Leader and Elites

As indicated before, if the dictator's power exceeds the total authority of his subordinates, he doesn't have to worry much about betrayal. However, if the dictator's power is not absolute, then he must be seriously concerned about his subordinate's allegiance, and for their part the subordinates must be deeply concerned about the possibility that the dictator may betray them for the sake of his own safety.

There is one solution to this problem, and that is to form a political mechanism that forces both sides to cooperate with each other in certain aspects in order to ease their mutual destructive suspicions. The function of this mechanism is to prevent the leader from deliberately abusing power while also convincing the subordinates that they can benefit more from investing in the current regime than betraying it. Some organs that might be considered for this mechanism include the upper-level organizations of the ruling party, a revolutionary council formed after a revolution, a military council in the case of military dictatorship, or a council of royal advisory in the case of a monarchy. In North Korea, the upper-level organizations of the ruling party, which is the Korean Workers' Party, would play this role. Thus, our analysis follows this scenario.

The ruling party plays three roles in relations between the dictator and the governing coalition. First, the ruling party embodies and guarantees the political trade-off made between the dictator and the governing coalition elites. Only when

a dictator convincingly assures his underlings of a considerable share of power will they regard devotion to the current regime as a better choice than betrayal. The dictator can back up his power-sharing guarantee by delegating some portion of his absolute authority to the ruling party. Second, another role of the central party is allowing the dictator and governing coalition members to come together regularly through the upper-level Party organs to negotiate agreements and consider policy and financial issues, making it hard for either the dictator or his underlings to conspire in secret. In other words, it makes their intentions and actions more transparent. This reduces the possibility of misunderstandings between the dictator and elites and increases their vested interests in power distribution and regime continuity. Third, once distribution of authority becomes institutionalized to a certain degree, the dictator needs to show that he will obey the official rules regarding the appointment of personnel at key agencies, areas of jurisdiction, ceremonial procedures, and government decision-making. This demonstrates to the public that the dictator will fulfill his promises regarding power distribution. Only once this happens can the dictator assure elites that they will enjoy long-term distribution of power and share benefits by serving the government.

According to this explanation, if the North Korean party leadership decides to revitalize the Central Party organs, it will be for the purpose of preventing conflict and mutual suspicions from breaking out between Kim Jong Eun and governing coalition elites after the absolute dictator Kim Jong Il's death. Kim Jong Il, who knows the nature of power better than anyone else, came to this conclusion before he died. Kim Jong Il himself used the main organs of the Central Party as a tool for expanding his personal power base in the 1970s and 1980s but let this organization fall to ruin in the 1990s and 2000s. However, for the sake of the safety of Kim Jong Eun and the successor regime, before his death Kim Jong Il executed a plan for restoring the Central Party organs and put them to use. In other words, while restricting some of the power of his son and successor Kim Jong Eun through reestablishment of Central Party organization, Kim Jong Il distributed stable long-term authority and privileges to certain governing coalition elites, most of whom had been his own underlings, and steadily pressured them to invest in the ascendant Kim Jong Eun regime.

Conclusion

As the authority of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il expanded dramatically, the key Central Party organs that had guaranteed power sharing among the governing coalition elites gradually lost their role in decision-making. During 1990s and 2000s the main Central Party organs responsible for decision-making remained in a state

of almost complete atrophy. In the process of constructing the successor system for Kim Jong Eun, the main organs of the Central Party were formally restored via a Party Delegates' Conference held in September 2010. Since then the Central Party's Politburo has sometimes functioned as announcing instrument of the major decision of the new North Korean government. Moreover, another Party Delegate's Conference is planned for mid-April 2012, foreshadowing an even greater decision-making role for the Central Party organs in the Kim Jong Eun regime.

Kim Jong Il decided to revive the major Party organs for the following reasons. Unlike the Kim Jong Il regime, in which the dictator held absolute authority over his underlings, the Kim Jong Eun regime is characterized by a more equal relationship between the dictator and his subordinates, and this will result in increased mutual suspicions and watchfulness along with the possibility that the government may grow unstable; thus these organs are needed to manage affairs in the event of this outcome. The Central Party organs were chosen to perform this role. The Central Party organs will play a part in enabling the dictator and the governing coalition elites to forge a reliable contract on power distribution and sharing of benefits and will help ensure that that contract is sustained in the long term. Such a device must exist to ease the mutual suspicions and wariness between the dictator and the governing coalition elites and enable their cooperation in perpetuating a stable regime. Kim Jong Il reached this conclusion and passed it on to Kim Jong Eun. Of course, even though this general direction has been chosen, it remains to be seen precisely how the Central Party organs' status will be elevated and whether the new governing system will fulfill its expected functions.