

The Dismissal of Ri Yong Ho and North Korea's Perspective on the Power Struggle

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Ri Yong Ho, the influential Chief of General Staff of the Korean People's Army (KPA), had been deposed. The announcement from North Korean sources regarding the deposed Ri Yong Ho had been summarized as "a dismissal from all duty due to health reasons." However, it is difficult to find similar cases in North Korea, since they are very rare due to several factors in the recruitment problems and the difficulties in replacing the regular personnel. This year, Ri Yong Ho had participated in 32 public activities with Kim Jong-un, and at Kim Jong-il's funeral, he was one of the "Gang of 8" who escorted the hearse at the very front with Kim Jong-un. Furthermore, this past July 8, Ri Yong Ho paid his respects to Kim Il Sung, who is enshrined in the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun, with Kim Jong-un on the 18th anniversary of his death. Thus, it is important to note that within 8 days of public activities, the KPA's highest ranking officer, Ri Yong Ho, had suddenly been removed from his position.

Usually in dictatorships or socialist states, cases for dismissal are rare, even if the influential incumbent is severely ill. In fact, it is common for the incumbents to maintain their positions in spite of serious illnesses or vegetative states. In the case of Woo Dong Cheok, a member of the "Gang of 8" who accompanied Kim Jong-il's hearse, not only were his public appearances suspended after Kim Jong-il's funeral, but there have also been unrelated sympathetic reports as well as signs predicting his removal, which have become more pronounced. Meanwhile, there have been no confirmed reports or observations in regards to Ri Yong Ho's health. Thus, it is highly unlikely that Ri Yong Ho was deposed from his position due to health reasons.

It is important to note the fact that Ri Yong Ho's removal was immediately announced. In the case of closed regimes, such as North Korea, information about the restructure of power among the elite is not immediately released, and it can be said that such secrets will remain confidential for an extended period of time. The broadcast announcing the removal of Ri Yong Ho indicates the degree of dissemination of relevant facts among the public and that this public announcement is targeted towards the KPA, the North Korean people and of course, the foreign press.

When piecing together the different factors, the deposed Ri Yong Ho cannot be categorized as an unbiased personnel change or a restructuring of power because it is a purge. The possibility that Ri Yong Ho is currently in detention or under house arrest is extremely high. Therefore, it is important to note the progress of the power struggle among the influential elite in the North. Especially under the Military First Policy, a power institution that prioritizes the military above all others, the suddenly deposed Ri Yong Ho casts a large shadow over the progress of the power struggle. Accordingly, Ri Yong Ho's removal is not the end but a prelude or turning point for the North Korea power struggle.

In April 2012, the Director of the KPA General Political Bureau Choe Ryong Hae was promoted to the 4th rank in the power hierarchy behind Kim Jong-un, Kim Yong Nam and Choe Yong Rim respectively, and since he overtook the 5th ranked Ri Yong Ho, Ri Yong Ho's status had already weakened. Ri Yong Ho began his military career in 1959 and rose to the highest position in the North Korean military as the influential Chief of General Staff of the KPA - the equivalent to the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff. In 2010, Kim Jong-il promoted Kim Jong-un in rank and as the Vice-Chairman of the Central Committee Party, which indicated Kim Jong-un's central role in the succession process.

During Kim Jong-il's lifetime, the influential military officer Ri Yong Ho was appointed to stabilize the succession process. Kim Jong-un's uncle, Jang Song Taek, was supposed to assist Kim Jong-un by securing the Party and administrative systems in addition to his obligations in containing the military. It was Kim Jong-il's intention that the rapid rise of Choe Ryong Hae, who is part of the Jang Song Taek coalition, should be part of Kim Jong-un's public announcement in regards to the succession. Kim Jong-un inevitably had to rely on the military to manage North Korea's long-term national crisis and called for the implementation of the North Korean version of an emergency of state: the "Military First Policy." This strengthened the military status during the transition period, and therefore, it can be perceived that Kim Jong-un endowed greater political powers to Jang Song Taek and Choe Ryong Hae to secure a level of stability. In order to determine the structure of the succession, Ri Yong Ho, Jang Song Taek and Choe Ryong Hae each contributed different roles, and the blueprint including these major figures had been completed during Kim Jong-il's lifetime. The succession process, however, attributed to the formation of the two factions consisting of: first, the military authorities and second, Party members and bureaucratic authorities.

Kim Jong-il's sudden death created a change in the structure. When Kim Jong-un adjusted to the power structure following the death of Kim Jong-il and the subsequent loss of a powerful control tower, he reached his limit due to his inadequate government experience and a lack of preparation in maintaining

power. This means that Kim Jong-un cannot retain his hold of power or adjust to the power struggle among the elite. Furthermore, Jang Song Taek's opportunity for a meteoric rise arrived in the post Kim Jong-il era due to his political base and experience. Consequently, a reorganization of the power structure as well as a power struggle may surface following the sudden death of Kim Jong-il.

Through the Party Delegate's Conference and the Supreme People's Assembly in April 2012, Kim Jong-un's power structure system had been established, and through this, the Jang Song Taek coalition emerged as an influential group. Although Jang Song Taek had nominated himself for membership in the Party Politburo, it is noteworthy that the Jang Song Taek coalition members rose in the ranks to heads of the military and Public Security. As North Korea is dependent on its military force, unyielding control over the military and the Public Security is needed in order to exert a level of power over the elites and the masses. It is important to note that the KPA's highest ranking official, Director of the General Political Bureau, Choe Ryong Hae; Minister of State Security and Director of the National Security Agency, Kim Won Hong; and Chief of the National Police Agency, Ri Myung Su are all members of the Jang Song Taek coalition. The Jang Song Taek coalition seized power through its core members in the military and public security, and the political landscape had been reorganized under the pretext of strengthening Kim Jong-un's power, which has been labeled as "Jang Song Taek restructuring power for Jang Song Taek."

In comparison, the elder groups and the influential military officials from the Jang Song Taek coalition were in relative decline during the Kim Jong-il era. Following Choe Ryong Hae overtaking Ri Yong Ho in the rankings, the 1st Vice-Director of the National Security Agency, Woo Dong Cheuk, had not make public appearances since Kim Jong-il's funeral. In addition, Kim Yong Chun and more recently, Kim Jong Gak, who is the 1st Deputy Director of the General Political Bureau, were military authority figures, who were once key personnel in the Kim Jong-il era. They had their positions turned over to the Director of the KPA and were distanced from exercising military power. Oh Kuk Ryol also did not play a large role in the restructuring process of the power elites.

We have noticed changes in the dynamics of the emerging military security forces with the Jang Song Taek coalition. It is difficult for special groups in the military to domination the power reorganization that had started in April within a short period of time, and thus, full-fledged and large-scale personnel changes are forthcoming. The military's domination has not ended due to the appointment of a civilian, Choe Ryong Hae, because the commander and division commander with military forces at hand as well as the formation of a solid base of support for key positions are still required. Ri Yong Ho's removal appears to be related to this process. Among the ranking group members of the Jang Song Taek coalition, new powers have emerged from the military ahead of the overall reorganization, and we can assume that Ri Yong Ho was in the middle of resisting the North Korean military or for certain reasons, there was some movement. There appears to have been no indication of Ri Yong Ho's dismissal, and this should be viewed jointly with the Jang Song Taek coalition's line of public order.

Consequently, Ri Yong Ho's dismissal is not a one-time event but part of a continuous process of political reformation centered on Jang Song Taek's coalition in the post Kim Jong-il era. Jang Song Taek's

coalition is attempting an overall political control over the military, cabinet and the Party, and has focused on the fact that this incident is far larger than that of the large-scale purges undertaken by Kim Jong-il. Through the purge of Ri Yong Ho as well as Choe Ryong Hae's promotion in the primary roles in the army as Brigade General, we can predict the replacement of the superior position of the Commanding General. Following the result of Hyun Yong Chul's promotion, it is suspected that Ri Yong Ho's successor will be someone who is close to Jang Song Taek and Choe Ryong Hae. There are also theories that Party Secretary Kim Kyung Hui is attempting a Party restructure. Jang Son Taek will be the control tower that oversees the reorganization process and manages the overall power based on his vast experience. All the processes will be in the name of strengthening the power of Kim Jong-un, which will be accomplished through the approval and closer cooperation with Kim Jong-un.

The question is whether the existing military-based power will resist or not. The immediate issue is how the military seniors and forces in the front lines, who have practiced military power, would respond to the dismissal of Ri Yong Ho. This is due to the fact that the Jang Song Taek coalition appears to have not yet completely dominated the Military and Public Security. Ri Yong Ho's dismissal might imply that North Korean military authorities are temporarily crowded out from the game of politics. We also need to pay special attention to the movements of core units such as the General Escort Bureau (Ministry of Public Security), which is the last bastion of the Kim Jong-il regime, and the Pyongyang Defense Command (PDC). The Jang Song Taek coalition's immediate concern is whether Kim Jong-un will be able to find a suitable military officer as a serious replacement for Ri Yong Ho, because if the military explicitly resists, the Jang Song Taek coalition may face a difficult situation. We may also predict that senior officials and the elite within the Party will resist both directly and indirectly against the reorganization of the Jang Song Taek coalition.

The stability of the North Korean regime depends on whether the comprehensive reshuffling of the Jang Song Taek coalition will proceed smoothly due to the fact that they are in a very different situation in comparison to the Civil Investigation Team (*Shimhwajo*— a Special Task Force) Incident, which had a solid control tower, namely Kim Jong-il. Especially since Kim Jong-un's ability to work through conflicts is fragile, he may reach his limits when conflict among elites for power exacerbate. It is also important to determine whether the firm trust between Kim Jong-un and Jang Son Taek will be maintained. If Jang Song Taek seizes excessive power, Kim Jong-un might recognize the need for a new support group, which may lead to a very different situation.

It is too presumptuous to consider the removal of Ri Yong Ho as a power struggle of political lines between reformists and hardliners. Since the Kim Jong-un regime has not consolidated power yet, it is difficult to infer that they deposed Ri Yong Ho, an influential power broker for the military, due to reasons such as the struggle between the political factions, which is a mid to long term issue. It is more appropriate to perceive the current situation as an urgent struggle. If the Jang Song Taek coalition eliminates the military and hardliners to seize power, Kim Jong-un can blame them for the crisis in North Korea and take appropriate appeasement measures through the global community, including South Korea. However, it appears that they have not yet entered this phase.

The change in the North Korean government has come to surface due to the deposed Ri Yong Ho, and in any case, this will bring about the weakening durability of the North Korean institution. North Korea has been in a perpetual crisis and prolonged its power with its “Military First Policy” and a sense of solidarity among the ruling elite. Conflicts over power will create schisms within the elite and debilitate the government’s ability to rule. The government reorganization has made rifts within the leadership inevitable. Consequently, in the case of civil disturbances or military riots, it is highly likely that they will demonstrate a limited ability to control and assess the situation, which the previous governments have capably handled. In particular, the stability of the regime will be under serious threat due to the absence of a leader with mediating abilities and a power charisma. We should pay sharp attention to the removal of Ri Yong Ho and see how the situation develops from the recent turn of events.