

The 6th Session of the 12th Supreme People's Assembly: An Analysis

Chon Hyun-Joon, Park Hyeong-Jung

Senior Research Fellows, KINU Center for North Korean Studies

Online Series CO 12-39

The 6th session of the 12th Supreme People's Assembly, held on September 25th, had contradicted the expectation by the majority of pundits on North Korea. Many experts predicted that a landmark legislation concerning economic reforms would emerge, but this was simply wishful thinking. It resulted in nothing more than the one-year extension of free education and other relevant matters in this regard and the election of select members to the Standing Committee.

The failure to announce policy measures for economic reform through a session at the Supreme Assembly should not be interpreted as unusual. In retrospect, there were very few cases in which a major economic policy had been established through legislation in the Supreme People's Assembly. The measures to improve economic management, embarked on July 1st, 2002, had been implemented through Kim Jong-il's personal address and instructions from the Cabinet.

The central agenda in this past session at the Supreme Assembly focused on educational matters. As a matter of fact, the educational system has been in serious disarray since the early 1990s due to the fiscal and administrative collapse. The announcement for reorganization is significant in that the North Korean authorities have expressed their interest in rectifying and expanding the education system. It has been followed by the Common Law for Education (January 19, 2011) and the Law on Higher Education (December 14, 2011). In other words, the recent measures were not a random occurrence but reflection on the North Korean authorities' allegedly persistent commitment to the reformation

of the education system. In its New Year's Joint Editorial, North Korea highlighted its achievements in basic science and technology, such as CNC(Computer Numerical Control), information technology, nanotechnology and bioengineering and emphasized the need to transform the North Korean economy into one that is technology-oriented. In addition, the improvement of the quality of education that meets the demands of the "age of knowledge economy" has been designated as a primary goal of the North Korean government.

During the 5th session of the 12th Supreme People's Assembly on April 13th, the annual report on education had elucidated the need to nurture talented students and improve education. It was stated that "competent management is the basis of nurturing talented students and schools at every level, and the improvement of the curriculum and teaching methods will meet the needs for real development." As an extension to this commitment, the North Korean authorities decided at this session to reorganize the education system and strengthen education on the general knowledge of the basic sciences, including mathematics, physics, chemistry and biology, as well as education in computer science and foreign languages.

Despite the government's purportedly strong commitment, it is too early to be optimistic about the sincerity of its intentions and the seriousness of its commitment to the reform of the educational system. This is attributed to the fact that the funding for the improvement in education will be an insurmountable challenge and that it is difficult to offer any realistic suggestions that will resolve the issue to the government. As a matter of fact, although the education in North Korea has been nominally free for eleven years in the past and currently for twelve years, the systematized "free" contributions from the students and their parents have funded the schools and paid the teachers. On one hand, the students and parents have been virtually forced to pay bribes and mobilized to all forms of free labor and political events as well as the collection of material goods, which can be exchanged for foreign currency, such as scrap metals, animal skins and forest products, among others. On the other hand, there have been virtually no investments in equipment and facilities for schools until recently. It is only natural that the administrative bureaucracy of education has been considerably weakened and plagued by severe corruption. It would be very difficult to rectify the administrative bureaucracy of education as well as to improve its competence and discipline. In addition, a large portion of school lessons is comprised of ideological education and political learning, which now includes extra material on Kim Jong-un in addition to Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong-il. Regrettably, the new measures on education at this past session of the Supreme Assembly had not hinted at any decrease in education on political and ideological subjects. The reduction could be one of the best indicators in gauging the sincerity of the North Korean authorities' commitment to improving the quality of its education.

In this respect, it is especially noteworthy to observe how effectively the "administrative guidance and legal control," which is promised under the Supreme People's Assembly's law "on the implementation of the overall 12-year compulsory education system," will be adhered to. It stipulates that "the Ministry of People's Security and the Prosecutor's Offices will strengthen legal controls at each level to eradicate the tendency of teachers and students to mobilize in activities that are not relevant to the courses

designated by the State.” Furthermore, “the Ministry of People’s Security and the Prosecutor’s Offices will engage in fierce legal struggles against the inclination to impose excessive social responsibilities on schools as well as education and scientific research institutes, and thereby hinder educational projects and scientific research.”

Meanwhile, the Supreme Assembly had also dealt with organizational matters. The Vice-Premier Kwak Bum Ki received an additional title of Chairman of the Budget Committee in the Supreme People’s Assembly. Nominally and strangely to us, who are acquainted with the division of power, he is now assigned to both the administration and legislature in the management of state budget. However, it is presumed that the title of “Chairman of the Budget Committee” does not hold any real power. The party secretary of the South Pyongan Province, Hong In Bum, and Central Chairman of the Kim Il Sung Socialist Youth Alliance, Jeon Yong Nam, were appointed as members of the Standing Committee of the Supreme People’s Assembly. Although the appointment of Hong In Bum is also noteworthy, members of the Standing Committee are nothing more than honorary titles and therefore, not highly significant. Jeon Yong Nam appears to have been given the title because he was an ex officio member and therefore the position was automatically guaranteed.¹⁾ © KINU 2012

※ The views expressed in this paper are entirely those of the authors and are not to be construed as representing those of the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU).

1) The Standing Committee consists of the Workers’ Union, Women’s Union, Buddhists’ Union, Chondo religious Chung Woo Party and the Chairman of the Committee for the Socialist Labor Youth Alliance.