



Online Series

2016. 6. 30. | CO 16-19

Analysis on the 4th Session of the 13th Supreme People's Assembly of North Korea

Kim, Kap-Sik
(Director, North Korean Studies Division)

North Korea held the 4th Session of the 13th Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) on June 29th - roughly 50 days after the 7th Congress of Korean Worker's Party (KWP). The intention behind holding the Session was to institutionalize and justify the power structure and the policy direction at the national level as suggested at the Congress.

Kim Jong-un's Complete Institutional Leadership

Kim Jong-un has solidified his authority and stature as the party's supreme leader by ascending to the position of KWP's chairman - a position newly created at the Seventh Congress held last May. It was estimated that his title as the first chairman of National Defense Commission (NDC) would be changed at the 13th SPA since a supreme leader of the socialist country is required to take charge of three entities - the party, the government, and the military. As well as expected, Kim Jong-un decided to close NDC and open State Affairs Commission (SAC), ascending to its chairman position. Now into 5 years of Kim Jong-un's ruling, his institutional leadership as suryong (supreme leader) has been technically completed

with the establishment of the Party Monolithic Leadership System centering around its chairman, the State Monolithic Leadership System based on SAC's chairman, and the Military Monolithic Leadership System led by the supreme commander of the Korean People's Army.

Facilitating Normalization of the Socialist Party-State System

The abolition of NDC and establishment of SAC has put an official end to “the emergency management system led by the military” in the Kim Jong-un era, ushering in the normalization phase of the socialist party-state system. A state governance centering around NDC has been an exceptional case of the socialist political system. As the title of the supreme national authority was changed from “national defense” to “state affairs,” the jurisdiction awarded to SAC seems to be expanded. Large number of officials – Park Bong-ju in charge of the economy, Ri Su-yong and Ri Yong-ho in external affairs, and Kim Yong Chol in the management of South Korea – have been included as SAC members whereas less military officials were appointed to SAC. The recent personnel reshuffling seems to reflect a Kim Jong-un's intention that from now on, the supreme leader will directly handle the broad range of state affairs via SAC, including unification, diplomacy, and the economy. What should not be overlooked in Kim's recent move is that Kim Jong-un's will to directly manage the broad range of state affairs might bring the issue of responsibility to the fore over whether the decision will be a successful attempt as well as the regime's stability issue. Meanwhile, the composition of SAC members suggests that the power elite structure has been stabilized in the Kim Jong-un era. It appears that at least for now Kim Jong-un has completed “placing his people at major positions” after repeated series of purge under the last 5 years of his ruling.

Proactive Will in Building Inter-Korean & External Relations

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (the DPRK) has been stepping up a

dialogue offensive toward the Republic of Korea (ROK) ever since Kim Jong-un insisted at the 7th Congress that the ROK government change its policy toward the North and that the inter-Korean relations be improved. National Defense Commission (NDC), the Ministry of People's Armed Forces (MPAF), the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of Korea (CPRK), and other social organizations demanded that the inter-Korean military summit be held for the improvement of inter-Korean relations. And they also have continued their propaganda offensives, such as sending an open letter to South Korea and overseas after having created the preparatory committee for holding a civilian-level dialogue to discuss ways to reunify the peninsula. This pattern was also reflected in the organizational reform of the 13th SPA. As previously pointed out, the party secretary in charge of the international affairs, the secretary in charge of South Korean affairs, and the foreign minister were included as SAC members. And the stature of CPRK, an organization used to be in the periphery of the party, has been escalated to the national authority. There was a time when the organizational stature given to CPRK served as a hindrance to forging an inter-Korean dialogue. But now in addition to its propaganda and instigation offensive, CPRK is expected to actively engage in building the inter-Korea relations as a dialogue partner to the Ministry of Unification and systematically and comprehensively implement the policy toward the South in association with the Unification Bureau of the Worker's Party.

Need for Kim Jong-un to Secure Legitimacy for its Leadership through Economic Reform

It may seem as though a system designed to implement a five-year national strategy for economic development has been established at the 13th SPA with new appointment of Park Bong-ju and three cabinet deputy ministers; strengthening the institutional system of cabinet responsibility; and adoption of the legislation aimed at "thoroughly conducting a five-year national strategy for economic development." But in reality only somewhat abstract measures were suggested at the commentary section of

Worker's Newspaper (Rodong Sinmun) on June 28th along with the goal - "laying the foundation for the sustainable economic development by reinvigorating a broad sector of the people's economy and ensuring to strike a balance between different sectors in the economy." Under the international sanctions, Chagangryeok (the power to survive through its own efforts) - first policy alone will not guarantee a path to addressing the current economic situation. If Kim Jong-un wants to solidify his position as North Korea's supreme leader, it is advisable to obtain the legitimacy of his leadership by showing his people the policy accomplishments. ©KINU 2016

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