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The Political Status and Role of Kim Yo-jong

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This article examines the political status and role of Kim Yo-jong. First, it refutes the arguments surrounding Kim Yo-jong's successorship that are based on three grounds: 1) rumors of Kim Jong-un's health issues, 2) Rodong Sinmun's report on Kim Yo-jong's "orders," and 3) Rodong Sinmun's "party center" report. Kim Yo-jong's political status and role will be analyzed through her official and unofficial positions. Officially, she is the Worker's Party of Korea's First Vice Director in charge of operations against South Korea. Unofficially, she is the sister of Kim Jong-un. Kim Yo-jong executes her political influence through both positions. Compared to Kim Kyong-hui, Kim Yo-jong enjoys a much more extended political status and role. However, based on the Ten Principles for the Establishment of a Monolithic Ideological System, she cannot be considered a successor. In the future, Kim Yo-jong's political status and role will either expand or shrink within the scope that Kim Jong-un has put in place.

The First Vice Director of North Korea's Central Committee of the ruling Workers' Party (hereinafter "the First Vice Director") Kim Yo-jong and her political status and role are at the center of attention. Some claim her to be the successor of the regime. Generally, these claims are based on three grounds. First, Kim Jong-un's

health seems to be at risk. Second, the Rodong Sinmun has, on numerous occasions, reported on Kim Yo-jong's orders. Third, Rodong-Sinmun has used the term "party center," which implies successorship. Does such an evidence warrant the arguments of Kim Yo-jong's successorship?

Evidence 1: Kim Jong-un's Alleged Health Concerns

The claim that Kim Yo-jong holds the successorship is based on the assumption that Kim Jong-un's health is gravely ill. After all, without fatal health issues, Kim Jong-un would not need a successor at the age of 37. However, if Kim Jong-un is facing dire health conditions, declaring an heir becomes very important. The lack of an heir would not only cause turbulences to Kim Jong-un regime but also cause a bloody struggle for power. In the case of the Soviet Union, core elites fiercely fought for the highest power due to the lack of an official successor. Stalin and Trotsky fought after Lenin's death and Khrushchev and Malenkov fought after Stalin's death to seize the supreme power.

Also, Kim Jong-un has the responsibility to succeed his supreme power to a *Paektu* lineage, following the lineage of his grandfather Kim Il-sung. North Korea follows a regular succession from Kim Il-sung to Kim Jong-il to Kim Jong-un according to an institutionalized procedure. North Korea puts the Supreme Leader at an absolute hierarchical priority over the party, and it has never democratically chosen a successor. It has fixed the system of hereditary succession along the Kim lineage—dynastic succession. Hence, Kim Jong-un's successor has to be his son. However, his soon is too young to succeed him. In such circumstances, another *Paektu* descendent can succeed Kim Jong-un, and this is why Kim Yo-jong's name is being brought up.

However, the core assumption that Kim Jong-un is seriously ill, which underlies the alleged claim of Kim Yo-jong's successorship, has no proof. The rumor around Kim Jong-un's health began with Daily NK's reporting on April 20 about Kim Jong-un's alleged cardiovascular surgery. The Daily NK reported that Kim Jong-un is recovering at a villa at the Hyangsan County from a cardiovascular surgery taken

place on April 12 at Hyangsan Medical Center in the Myohyangsan region of North Pyongan Province. It followed that the doctors have returned to Pyongyang on the 19th after Kim Jong-un's conditions have stabilized. The essence of the report was that Kim Jong-un underwent a simple cardiovascular surgery.

The report went viral after Kim Jong-un did not attend the memorial at the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun on April 15, one that he has routinely attended every year. The issue has magnified significantly when CNN reported on April 21 that Kim Jong-un is seriously ill. The rumor only waned after Kim Jong-un showed up for the first time in 20 days. He proved himself healthy by attending the building completion ceremony at the Suncheon Phosphatic Fertilizer Factory on May 1, the Politburo meeting on June 7, and the extended Politburo meeting on July 2.

Nonetheless, Kim Jong-un has not cleared the doubts about his health completely. He has a family history of cardiovascular disease and is exposed to various factors that can cause or worsen cardiovascular problems such as extreme obesity, smoking, overworking, and stress. Also, even when taking COVID-19 into account, the number of Kim Jong-un's public activities have decreased noticeably, thereby contributing to the lingering doubts on his health. On average, Kim Jong-un has attended around 50 public events in May. However, he only attended 17 events, 66% less than the average attendance rate in May of previous years. Despite questionable circumstances, there is no clear evidence that Kim Jong-un is facing a fatal health condition. Rather, Kim Jong-un proved himself healthy in public. Hence, claiming Kim Yo-jong's successorship at this moment is too much of an early call.

Evidence 2: Rodong Sinmun's "Order" Report

Some argue that Rodong Sinmun has publicized about Kim Yo-jong's orders numerous times because she is the successor. On June 5, Rodong Sinmun included the statement from the spokesperson of the United Front Department of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), which wrote, "On June 5, First Vice Director Kim Yo-jong gave orders to evaluate the operationalization of the contents in the statement regarding operations against South Korea." It is very rare

for Rodong Sinmun to report on the orders of someone other than the Supreme Leader. According to Article 4 Clause 7 of the Ten Principles for the Establishment of a Monolithic Ideological System, the orders and directions of the party must be distinguished from those of the individual officials, and the contents of the latter must not be organizationally disseminated or collectively discussed as if they are official conclusions or directions.

However, the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported on June 9 that Kim Yong-chol and Kim Yo-jong gave orders. In an article “Have Completely Disconnected All Communication Lines with South Korea,” the KCNA wrote the following: “at the meeting with departments handling South Korean affairs that took place on the 8th, Vice Chairman Kim Yong-chol and First Vice Director Kim Yo-jong emphasized that South Korean affairs must be considered affairs against an ‘enemy’ and ordered the evaluation of phased anti-South Korea operations to adequately punish the traitors and human trash and ordered the disjoining of all communication lines with South Korea.”

North Korean media not only reported on Kim Yo-jong’s orders but also Kim Yong-chol and Kim Yo-jong’s orders. Their reports on these orders are exceptional cases but not a violation of Article 4 Clause 7 of the Ten Principles; they were reporting on the *Surjong* orders ratified by the Supreme Leader and the party directives rather than on the individual opinions of Kim Yo-jong and Kim Yong-chol. The reports on Kim Yo-jong’s “orders” can be interpreted as the delivery of orders from the Supreme Leader and the party and not as an indication of Kim Yo-jong’s successorship.

Evidence 3: Rodong Sinmun’s “Party Center” Report

Some professionals point to another piece of evidence for Kim Yo-jong’s successorship. They argue that Rodong Sinmun has frequently used the expression “party center” when dealing with Kim Yo-jong’s central role in inter-Korean relations. On its June 7 article “Our Country First,” Rodong Sinmun used the phrase “ideology and breath in line with the party center.” On its June 10 article “Self-reliant DPRK (Juche Chosun)’s Ultimate Weapon,” it wrote, “ideology, willingness, and steps

together with the great party center.” On its June 11 commentary “The Supreme Leader is the Life and the Mental Pillar of the People,” it introduced the expression “firmly united around the party center.”

Originally, “party center” was an expression connoting the heir Kim Jong-il. Ever since he became the official successor in the 8th Plenary Meeting of 5th Central Committee of the WPK held on February 5, 1974, Kim Jong-il has been called the “party center” or the “dear party center.” Some argue that Rodong Sinmun’s recent use of the term is also being taken in this context. However, whether Rodong Sinmun used “party center” to mean Kim Yo-jong is uncertain. On numerous occasions, it used the expression to indicate Kim Jong-un or the Center Committee of the WPK. The expression “party center” has been frequently used during the 7th Congress of the WPK on May 8, 2016. Kim Jong-un’s address included statements such as, “all problems should be centered toward the party center and its conclusion should be taken as the sole solution and implemented as such,” “our party objects behaviors and factors that destroy our organizational unity and challenge the monolithic leadership of the party center,” and “party center being as the only center.”

On its January 1, 2018 article “On the 2018 New Year’s Celebration Performance 《The Feature of Chosun》,” Rodong Sinmun writes, “following the single path guided by the great party center toward the banner of independence, raise high the principle of giving priority to the spirit of self-reliance(*Charkyok Kaengsaeng*).” Rodong Sinmun has, on many occasions, used “party center” as to mean Kim Jong-un and the Center Committee of the WPK.

In sum, there is not enough critical evidence backing Kim Yo-jong’s successorship. Then, what exactly is the political status and role of Kim Yo-jong, who suddenly rose to the center of attention. Is Kim Yo-jong North Korea’s number two? To answer this question, we need to analyze Kim Yo-jong’s official and unofficial status.

Kim Yo-jong’s Political Status and Role: Official Position

Officially, Kim Yo-jong is the First Vice Director of the WPK and an alternate

member of the Politburo. She was appointed as the First Vice Director of the WPK on December 2019. However, her affiliation was not disclosed. Some speculate that she has likely been promoted to the First Vice Director of the Organization and Guidance Department. She began her career in November 2014 as a Vice Director of the WPK Central Committee, was promoted to an alternate member of the Politburo in October 2017, and to the First Vice Director of the party's Propaganda and Agitation Department in February 2018. Some argue that her speedy promotion would have led her to a higher position at the First Vice Director of the Organization and Guidance Department on December 2019 than the First Vice Director of the Propaganda and Agitation Department.

However, since her affiliation has not been disclosed, it cannot be said that she is indeed the First Vice Director of the Organization and Guidance Department. Kim Yo-jong's political status and role are implied through the United Front Department's spokesperson statement released on June 5. The statement revealed that Kim Yo-jong is a First Vice Director responsible for the whole operations against South Korea. Being responsible for operations against South Korea means she assumes one of the three roles. First, she might be the First Vice Director of the United Front Department which administrates operations against South Korea. Second, she might be the First Vice Director of the Secretariat which also administrates practical operations against South Korea. These two roles are limited to dealing with operations against South Korea. In case Kim Yo-jong has one of the two roles, her political status and role are limited to dealing with operations against South Korea.

Third, Kim Yo-jong might be instructing operations against South Korea as the First Vice Director of the Organization and Guidance Department. If she is, her political status and role have expanded significantly. Taking the role as a senior official of the Organization and Guidance Department—a core department of the party, Kim Yo-jong is expected to have control over operations against South Korea as well as domestic and foreign affairs. In this case, she will be likely to rise up the rank as a core senior official of the Kim Jong-un regime.

Which position Kim Yo-jong holds in instructing operations against South Korea remains uncertain. However, official hierarchy in dealing with operations against

South Korea is as follows: Vice Chairman of the Central Committee of the WPK Kim Yong-chol (former secretary in charge of operations against South Korea), First Vice Director Kim Yo-jong, and the Chief of the United Front Department Jang Kum-chol. The hierarchy can be checked through the KCNA's report on June 9. In the article "Have Completely Disconnected All Communication Lines with South Korea," the KCNA reported the following: "at the meeting with departments handling South Korean affairs that took place on the 8th, Vice Chairman Kim Yong-chol and First Vice Director Kim Yo-jong emphasized that South Korean affairs must be considered affairs against an 'enemy' and ordered the evaluation of phased anti-South Korea operations to adequately punish the traitors and human trash and ordered the disjoining of all communication lines with South Korea."

The KCNA wrote in the order of Kim Yong-chol and Kim Yo-jong. Officially, Kim Yong-chol holds a higher status in the party as the Vice Chairman of the Center Committee of the WPK and Politburo Member compared to the First Vice Director and Alternate Member of the Politburo Kim Yo-jong. However, Kim Yo-jong's political status and role regarding operations against South Korea is likely to be higher and more significant than Vice Chairman Kim Yong-chol and Chief Jang Geum-chol. Both Kim Yong-chol and Jang Geum-chol are likely to be assisting Kim Yo-jong.

The relationship between Kim Yo-jong and Kim Yong-chol can be understood by examining the relationship between the International Liaison Secretary (currently the Vice Chairman of the Center Committee) Kim Yong-sun and the Vice Director of the International Liaison Department Kim Kyong-hui during the Kim Jong-il regime after October 1976. Former Secretary Hwang Jang-yop testified on this matter. Back then, Kim Yong-sun oversaw the operations in the International Liaison Department. However, Kim Kyong-hui installed a direct phone line with Kim Yong-sun and exerted greater influence on the operations of the department. Kim Kyong-hui, who was not tasked with officially overseeing the International Liaison Department, exerted greater influence than the official leader of the department. Likewise, Kim Yo-jong, who actually holds the position of overseeing all operations against South Korea, is expected to exert greater influence over the operations against South Korea than Kim Yong-chol.

Kim Yo-jong's Political Status and Role: Unofficial Position

Kim Yo-jong will exert political influence through her unofficial position as the sister of Kim Jong-un. Within the ruling coalition, Kim Yo-jong is Kim Jong-un's most trusted person. She can always meet Kim Jong-un and can express her opinions on domestic and foreign affairs. Also, Kim Jong-un can ask about her opinions on important issue areas. North Korean elites will approach Kim Yo-jong to exert political and policy influence on Kim Jong-un. Hence, Kim Yo-jong's political status and influence will likely grow.

Those seeking to move up the ladder will also approach Kim Yo-jong. When Kim Kyong-hui was the Vice Director of the International Liaison Department, she was inundated by those seeking to move up the ladder. Kim Yo-jong has a much higher political status and role compared to Kim Kyong-hui. She will likely accumulate power and wealth, exerting influence on personnel reshuffling.

Finally, North Korean elites will likely treat Kim Yo-jong favorably. According to Hwang Jang-yop's memoir, officials in the Organization and Guidance Department and the Propaganda and Agitation Department fantasized over Yang Hyong-sop and Ho Dam simply because they were from the Supreme Leader's family lineage. Fantasies over the Supreme Leader's sister must be much more intense. Kim Yo-jong's voice will likely influence elites in various decision-making processes.

Kim Yo-jong as Number Two

Nonetheless, the chances of Kim Yo-jong being number two are low because a number two cannot exist under the system of monolithic rule of the Supreme Leader. After the institutionalization of the system of monolithic rule of the Supreme Leader in the 1970s, there were only people considered as being second-in-power. They were Kim Jong-il, who was the heir of Kim Il-sung prior to 1985, and Kim Jong-un, who was the heir of Kim Jong-il. They were official successors approved by the party. According to Hwang Jang-yop, Kim Jong-il had full control over the party, politics, and military after 1985 so as to make it seem like a joint regime between Kim Jong-il

and Kim Il-sung.

Other than that, there has been non-existence of number two in North Korean politics. The Ten Principles for the Establishment of a Monolithic Ideological System prevents the emergence of a number two. The Ten Principles are composed of various clauses preventing the rise of a number two or factions. Article 4 Clause 7 prohibits the arbitrary ordering or disseminating of party ideology, stances, and directives by individual officials. Article 6 Clause 3, 4, and 5 prohibit fantasizing, flattering, and idolizing individual officials as well as sectarianism, regionalism, and familism in order to prevent the development of factions. Article 9 Clause 5, 6, and 7 prohibit individual officials from convening organizational meetings in the party, government, and working groups, concluding a meeting against the party's intentions, mobilizing social movements, resolving problems among officials or appointing, firing, and punishing officials on the basis of private relationships or monetary relationships such as family lines, friendships, regional affiliations, and teacher-student relationships. Jang Song-thaek was executed for turning the Party's Administrative Department into a micro-empire. Kim Yo-jong is not exempt from the Ten Principles. In order for her to survive in the long run, she should adhere to the Ten Principles, refrain from creating factions, and prevent herself from standing out as a number two.

Future Changes in Kim Yo-jong's Status: Comparison with Kim Kyong-hui

In order to analyze Kim Yo-jong's political status and role, we need to examine the case of Kim Kyong-hui. Kim Kyong-hui was the Vice Director of the International Liaison Department (after 1976) and the Director of the Light Industry Department (after 1987). Prior to 2009, she was never placed in any of the core departments such as the Organization and Guidance Department or the Propaganda and Agitation Department. That was because Kim Jong-il strictly restrained Kim Kyong-hui's political role. She could only expand her political influence within the scope allowed by Kim Jong-il. She extended her political influence after Kim Jong-il fell ill from cardiovascular disease in 2008. Kim Jong-il assigned Kim Kyong-hui as the guardian of Kim Jong-un. She was appointed as the Party Director in June 2009 and as a member

of the Politburo and the General of the People's Army. In April 2012, directly after Kim Jong-un's rise to power, she became the Secretary of the Central Committee of the WPK.

Kim Yo-jong's political status and role as the First Vice Director of the Propaganda and Agitation Department and the overseer of all operations against South Korea as the First Vice Director of the WPK are much higher and significant compared to Kim Kyong-hui's. Also, unlike Kim Kyong-hui, Kim Yo-jong is deeply involved in the Kim Jong-un regime's decision-making processes. Kim Yo-jong executed most parts of the inter-Korean summit, the U.S.-North Korea summit, and the North Korea-China summit and led both the 2018 inter-Korean dialogues and the recent inter-Korean contentions. The rumor of her being the second-in-power arouse in such contexts. However, it is hard to view her as a number two. She is only overseeing the operations against South Korea as the official First Vice Director of the WPK and politically influencing the domestic and foreign affairs policies using her unofficial status as a member of the royal family.

As it was with Kim Kyong-hui under the Kim Jong-il regime, the future of Kim Yo-jong's political status and role are completely at the hands of Kim Jong-un. Kim Yo-jong's roles will expand and shrink within the scope Kim Jong-un has put in place. If Kim Jong-un appoints her to core departments such as the Organization and Guidance Department or the State Security Department, her political influence will strengthen. However, if he limits her roles to operations against South Korea and foreign affairs, her political influence will be limited. ©KINU 2020

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