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Analysis of the 8th Party Congress of WPK in North Korea(3): Politics

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The political objective reported during North Korea's 8th Party Congress can be summarized as the solidification of Kim Jong-un's personal dictatorship by strengthening the Party-centered leadership structure. Specific measures can be distinguished between Party policies, institutions, and official appointments. Policies were reviewed through the performance assessment report by the Party Central Committee, institutional reorganization was implemented through revisions to Party rules, and personnel changes were conducted through the election of members to central organizations of the Party. The Kim Jong-un regime also clearly stated its legitimacy and legacy by formalizing Kim-il-sung-ism-Kim-jong-il-ism. The 8th Party Congress also proposed measures to enhance cohesion among the elite, gain public support through the politics based on the people-first principle, improve ideological projects, and strengthen organizations for control and surveillance. Kim Jong-un appointed officials to key positions of power within his ruling coalition whose loyalty and abilities were verified. In the area of politics, the role of the Workers' Party of Korea is expected to further expand in order to further solidify the personal dictatorship of Kim Jong-un.

The political objectives stated in the performance assessment report provided at North Korea's 8th Party Congress can be summarized as the solidification of Kim Jong-un's personal dictatorship by strengthening the Party-centered leadership structure. The policies, institutions, and personnel of the Party were revised to achieve this goal; policies were reviewed through the overall performance assessment of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), institutions reformed through changes to the rules of the Party, and personnel was reshuffled through elections for membership in the Party's central guidance organizations.

1. Outlining Main Policies to Strengthen the System of Personal Dictatorship

The Party's policies were presented through the section titled "For Development of Party Work" in the overall performance assessment provided by the Party Central Committee. The core task was to strengthen the personal dictatorship system to further solidify Kim Jong-un's absolute rule and power. It was reported that the first task of the Party is to establish the monolithic leadership system under Kim Jong-un. The report demanded that Party organizations and officials wage "uncompromising struggle" by ensuring "the absolute authority of the Party Central Committee always and everywhere and staunchly safeguard it" while never "tolerate or connive at even the slightest tendency to undermine the authority of the Party Central Committee." In doing so, the report reconfirmed that the most important responsibility of the Party and its leaders is to fight to preserve Kim Jong-un's personal dictatorship.

Methods of strengthening Kim Jong-un's personal dictatorship can be categorized between policies for party officials and , policies for the people of North Korea, ideological education, and strengthening surveillance apparatus. Policies for party officials and the people are the two main pillars that sustain Kim Jong-un's power. This is because authoritative regimes generally lose power due to either the fragmentation of the elites or popular uprisings. First, policies intended for the elites required strong cohesion among Party officials centered on Kim Jong-un. This is

because conflicts among elites cause the destabilization of Kim Jong-un's power and leadership. The Kim Jong-un regime emphasized measures intended to enhance cohesion among Party leaders. The Party required that officials remain absolutely loyal to Kim Jong-un. The 8th Party Congress also stressed to its officials the importance of the 'single-minded unity of the Party and of the revolutionary line.' It also called for the selection and training of officials whose loyalty towards Kim Jong-un have been verified. The Party's overall performance assessment urged the strengthening of culture and control programs as well as the strict and principled selection of Party executives in order to improve the quality of Party officials. Moreover, the report called for the strengthening of primary Party organizations and Party cells, the lower-echelon organizations of the Party. This is because primary Party organizations and Party cells are the basic units through which loyalty towards Kim Jong-un among Party members is cultivated.

Second, policies oriented towards the people of North Korea included strategies to ensure the public's eager support for Kim Jong-un and the Party. Kim Jong-un has made efforts to gain the public's approval since ascending to power because disillusionment among the people threatens Kim Jong-un's legitimacy and causes the collapse of the ruling structure. Kim Jong-un has used the 8th Party Congress to stipulate people-centric rule as the basic principle of politics. The report codified the assertion that politics based on the people-first principle will be the basic ruling principle that will determine either the 'survival or ruin of the Party' as well as 'the victory or failure of socialism.' The slogan, "everything for the people and everything by relying on them" was announced as the core of its leadership ideology. Kim Jong-un urged that the 'single-minded unity' of both the Party and the people of North Korea be strengthened, and that the broad masses more closely rally behind the Party.

Third, the section on the Party's ideological work stressed ideological education towards both Party members and the people of North Korea. The report emphasized that ideological work is one of the main tasks of the Party in leading the revolution, and that it is a vital task that should not be neglected during the entire period towards revolution and construction. The principle of unitary

management centered on propaganda efforts was proposed as a method of ideological work, while the Party's devotion and love for the people was stressed as the main theme. The report also urged Party members to pursue Party work in a populist and realistic fashion that adheres to the Party's idea of believing in the people as in Heaven. Party organizations were urged to continue their uncompromising struggle against the slightest sign of abuse of power, bureaucracy, irregularities, and corruption as they constitute the greatest threat and menace against the Party. The Kim Jong-un regime also advanced specific ideological projects intended to prevent the disapproval of the people of North Korea.

Fourth, surveillance apparatus is a core element for the preservation of Kim Jong-un's personal dictatorship. The stable operation of surveillance organizations supervising Party officials and members as well as the people determines the sustainability of the regime. Kim Jong-un underscored the importance of the judicial, prosecutorial, and public and state security organs fulfilling their sacred mission and duty as reliable defenders of the socialist system in defending the system, policy, and the people of North Korea. Kim Jong-un also called for the eradication of non-socialist and anti-socialist practices as well as the firm establishment of the socialist lifestyle throughout the country to maintain the support of the public. Given this, North Korea's judicial, prosecutorial, public and state security organs will strengthen its surveillance and control of activities that hinder Kim Jong-un's personal dictatorship.

2. Revisions of Party Rules and Institutional Reorganization

The 8th Party Congress reorganized the Party structure by revising Party rules to strengthen Kim Jong-un's personal dictatorship. In order to enhance Kim Jong-un's legitimacy, the characteristic and mission of the revolution was formally defined as Kim-il-sung-ism-Kim-jong-il-ism. As a consequence, North Korea's national strategy for the next 5 years is expected to follow the Party's approach and policies that have been established through the Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il eras. The 8th Party Congress announced a strong military force as a way to pursue

Kim-il-sung-ism-Kim-jong-il-ism. The report stated that a formidable military will defend the regime, ensure permanent and peaceful stability on the Korean Peninsula, and serve as the material foundation necessary for the completion of the historical achievement of national unification. Given this, it is expected that North Korea will pursue domestic and foreign policy based on the principle of bolstering its military power.

Kim Jong-un's official title was changed to the general secretary of the Party. Kim Jong-un was initially named first secretary in April, 2012 soon after his ascension to power, and he later assumed the title of Chairman of the Worker's Party after the 7th Party Congress held in May, 2016. Until now, Kim Jong-un had not used the title of general secretary in deference to Kim Jong-il, who had been named "eternal general secretary" when Kim Jong-un first became the leader. It appears that assuming the title of general secretary intends to elevate Kim Jong-un's stature to the same level of leadership as Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, thereby absolutizing and deifying Kim Jong-un's authority. As a result, Kim Jong-un's personal dictatorship is expected to strengthen further.

Revisions to Party rules further strengthened the Party-centric system as the pivotal role in Kim Jong-un's personal dictatorship. The principle of Party superiority was reaffirmed, and it was codified that the "Party's authority as the highest form of political institution" that supports Kim Jong-un's absolute power "should be thoroughly guaranteed." The Party prepared institutional mechanisms through which it could comprehensively guide and control every government organization as well as the military. Moreover, the former positions of head secretary, secretary, and vice-secretary were reinstated, and the secretariat was also restored.

Control over the military through the Party was further enhanced. This is because while it functions as an organization defending the regime when sufficiently controlled, the military can be a critical threat to the regime when it becomes uncontrolled. By implementing his Party-centered leadership and power, Kim Jong-un has attempted to reduce the extensive political influence of the military which had expanded as a result of North Korea's military-first policy. The 8th Party Congress managed to completely erase the legacy of the military-first policy. The

Party has now established a system of controlling the military through the organization and guidance department and the military political guidance department. The duty of the People's Army was stipulated as "the revolutionary military force of the Worker's Party of Korea that follows the guidance of the Party." Politics based on the people-first principle replaced the military-first policy as the basic ruling principle. The military-first policy that utilized the military to preserve the regime during the Arduous March has now become a part of history.

The Party's capacity to censor and supervise Party organizations and members has also been extensively enhanced. This indirectly indicates how rule violations by Party organizations and members has become much more frequent and an overall lack of discipline more widespread. The political bureau officially discussed the issue of corruption in the Party twice during its meetings in 2020. The expanded meeting of the political bureau held in February 2020 discussed an incident in which officials including the vice-principal at the Kim Il-sung Elite Party School, an institute where Party officials are educated and trained, accepted bribes in exchange for preferential treatment for admission and grades. The Party committee was dismissed and related officials were fired. Ri Man Kon, the director of the organization and guidance department at the time, also accepted responsibility for the incident and resigned. The expanded meeting of the political bureau later held in November denounced the Pyongyang Medical University Party committee's corruption regarding admissions, forced fundraising, and the buying and selling of positions and jobs as "serious criminal acts" as well as "anti-Party, anti-people, and anti-socialist practices." The political bureau also criticized the professional negligence of the responsible Party departments as well as the judicial, prosecutorial, public and security organs that failed to adequately regulate these transgressions.

Revised Party rules consider acts of corruption within the Party as a behavior that threatens Kim Jong-un's personal dictatorship and have consequently strengthened oversight mechanisms considerably. First, the Party Central Auditing Commission absorbed the Party Central Control Commission to not only audit the Party's finances but also oversee violations of Party rules and regulations that harm the monolithic leadership of Kim Jong-un. As a result, the Party Central Auditing

Commission has been transformed into a core organization within the Party. The rule inspection department and the justice department were newly installed in the Party secretariat. The rule inspection department is expected to investigate cases of rule violations that undermine Kim Jong-un's personal dictatorship. The justice department, similar to the former administration department, is expected to oversee the judicial, prosecutorial, and public security organs. The anticipated effect is the extensive strengthening of censorship and surveillance within the Party.

The 8th Party Congress has also implemented measures to improve the quality of Party members. This indicates the strengthening of loyalty education of Party members towards Kim Jong-un. The period for Party member candidacy was extended from one year to two years. The bar for entry into the Party was also heightened to thoroughly verify members' loyalty towards Kim Jong-un. Penalties for Party members and organizations were also hardened. Members that fail to fulfill their duties for more than three years will now be expelled from the Party. Party organizations and departments within the Party that irresponsibly manage projects and cause severe consequences will receive warnings, severe warnings, and the punishment of project suspension.

Measures for the efficient management of the Presidium of the political bureau and the Party Central Military Commission were also proposed. The practical authority and function of the Presidium of the political bureau were vastly strengthened and expanded. As the de facto highest decision-making organization, the Presidium now has the authority to discuss and decide important issues, and also appoint or fire Party and government officials at any time. The power of the members of the Presidium has also increased as they now have the ability to chair political bureau meetings after being designated by Kim Jong-un. Meanwhile, the Party Central Military Commission now has the ability to adjust the number of participants regardless of quorum based on the nature of the issue being discussed. This appears to indicate North Korea's intent to optimize and simplify the decision-making structure on military issues such as military emergencies and the nuclear weapons program that are time sensitive and require high levels of security.

3. Personnel Changes

Kim Jong-un has replaced some members of his leadership coalition. Rather than being disciplinary, however, it appears that it was mostly the result of a natural generational transition, as well as the outcome of hiring officials based on their work capacity and the intent to appoint close confidants to core positions. A few members of the Presidium of the political bureau, which consist of the highest-ranking officials in the Party, were also replaced. The old vice-chairman Pak Pong-ju was fired, and Jo Yong-won, the organization secretary, was newly appointed. Secretaries of the Party Central Committee as well as executive officials in the secretariat were also announced. The number of Party secretaries was reduced from 10 to 7. Jo Yong-won (organization), Pak Thae-song (propaganda), Ri Pyong-chol (military), Jung Song-hak (auditing), Ri Il-hwan (working organization), Kim Tu-il (economy), and Choe Sang-gon (science education) were appointed as Party secretaries.

The responsibilities of Party secretaries were reduced to the three core functions of managing Party organization and propaganda and agitation, nuclear weapons and the military, and the economy and science education. This demonstrates that the direction of Kim Jong-un's state management is aimed towards concentration and efficiency. Party organization will be managed by secretary Jo Yong-won with assistance from the director of the organization and guidance department Kim Jae-ryong, the director of the rule inspection department Pak Thae-dok, the director of the cadres department Ho Chol-man, and the director of the justice department Kim Hyung-sik. The issue of propaganda and agitation will be led by the propaganda secretary Pak Thae-song supported by the director of propaganda and agitation department Choe Hwi (presumed). The nuclear weapons program and the military will be guided and controlled by the military secretary Ri Pyong-chol with the assistance of the director of the military political guidance department O Il-jong. The economy and science education will be led by the economy secretary Kim Tu-il and the science education secretary Choe Sang-gon, with Pak Myong-sun (light industry) and Ri Chol-man (agriculture) also playing important roles.

While some officials lost their positions, others within the ruling elite class gained power as their loyalty to Kim Jong-un and professional abilities were recognized. Most noteworthy is a member of the Presidium of the political bureau and organization secretary Jo Yong-won. The appointment of secretary Jo to the Presidium appears to have been intended to align his official rank within the Party with his actual degree of power and influence. This is because the organization secretary is the de facto most powerful official within both the Party and North Korea aside from the general secretary Kim Jong-un. Based on his vast experience as an official at the organization and guidance department, Jo Yong-won is expected to be mandated by Kim Jong-un to manage the organization of the Party and exert considerable influence on the decision-making process on major national issues. Along with the director of the organization and guidance department Kim Jae-ryong, secretary Jo will have a decisive impact on the sustainability and survivability of the Kim Jong-un regime.

Director of the rule inspection department Pak Thae-dok will simultaneously assume the position of vice-chairman of the Party Central Auditing Commission and, with the chairman of the Party Central Auditing Commission Jung Song-hak, is expected to exert considerable influence as he is placed in charge of investigating and censuring rule violations by Party organizations and members that harm the personal dictatorship of Kim Jong-un, and is responsible for restoring and establishing discipline within the Party. As the director of the military political guidance department, O Il-jong will succeed Choe Pu-il to assume a crucial role in controlling and guiding the military. The Party's control over the military will be overseen by both the vice-director for the military in the organization and guidance department and director O Il-jong.

One of the notable officials demoted in these personnel changes is Kim Yo-jong. Kim Yo-jong was relegated from her former position as an alternate member of the political bureau. It appears that Kim Jong-un deliberately excluded Kim Yo-jong from her position as an alternate member in order to dispel rumors regarding how Kim Yo-jong is next in line because such speculations create substantial political pressure on Kim Jong-un. The more rumors about how Kim

Yo-jong will succeed Kim Jong-un spread, the more suspicions regarding Kim Jong-un's health increases and his absolute authority subsequently weakens. Speculation about how Kim Yo-jong is next in line is expected to be somewhat tamed by these personnel changes.

Despite such measures, however, Kim Yo-jong's political stature and role is not expected to change that much. This is first and foremost because Kim Jong-un trusts his sister the most within his ruling coalition. Therefore, it is unlikely that Kim Yo-jong's political rank and influence will diminish unless she makes a major mistake. Kim Yo-jong will continue to aide Kim Jong-un closely. Moreover, tensions between Kim Jong-un and North Korean officials in charge of North Korea's relations with the U.S. and South Korea will enhance Kim Yo-jong's role. So far, Kim Jong-un has harshly punished officials responsible for relations with the U.S. and South Korea whenever they made mistakes or failed to achieve policy objectives. For example, the main officials in charge of diplomatic exchanges with the U.S. were disciplined following the failed Hanoi summit meeting, and some were even purged. Officials responsible for interactions with the U.S. and South Korea are likely to place Kim Yo-jong at the forefront to partially deflect blame for policy failures. Kim Yo-jong serves as a useful safety net for these officials and diplomats. As a case in point, Kim Yo-jong demonstrated sustained relevance by issuing a statement criticizing South Korea on January 13 immediately following the 8th Party Congress.

The influence of officials in charge of North Korea's relations with the U.S. and South Korea within the Party has greatly diminished. The position of international secretary and South Korea secretary have been eliminated from the secretariat, and only the international department and the united front department remain in the departments offices. Kim Yo-jong, who oversees North Korea's policies towards South Korea, was demoted from the rank of first vice-director to vice-director. The former vice-chairman of the Party (currently the secretary of the secretariat) Kim Yong-chol has been relegated to the director of the united front department. Choe Son-hui, who used to be in charge of diplomacy with the U.S., has been also demoted from being a member of the Party Central Committee to an alternate member. The overall decrease of the stature of officials responsible for relations with the U.S.

and South Korea appears to have been due to the failure of the U.S.-North Korea summit meeting in Hanoi, inability to gain the upper-hand in inter-Korean relations, and the protracted stalemate on the Korean Peninsula. The analysis that the diminished influence of these officials is the result of disciplinary action becomes even more compelling when compared to the meteoric rise of Ri Pyong-chol who has become the only military official in the Presidium in the political bureau based on his role in charge of developing North Korea's nuclear arsenal. The shrinking influence of these diplomatic officials also suggests that there are likely to be considerable changes to the policy priorities of the Kim Jong-un regime.

At the 8th Party Congress, Kim Jong-un reorganized the Party-centric system, presented the policies of the Party, reformed institutions, and conducted personnel reshuffles in order to further solidify his personal dictatorship. Moreover, the Kim Jong-un regime clarified the legitimacy and legacy of its rule by formalizing Kim-il-sung-ism-Kim-jong-il-ism. The 8th Party Congress also proposed measures to enhance cohesion among the elite, gain public support through the politics based on the people-first principle, improve ideological projects, and strengthen organizations for control and surveillance. Kim Jong-un appointed officials to key positions of power within his ruling coalition whose loyalty and abilities were verified. In the area of politics, the role of the Workers' Party of Korea is expected to further expand in order to further solidify the personal dictatorship of Kim Jong-un. ©KINU 2020

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