

Announcing ‘Austerity and Rectification’ at the Sixth Cell Secretaries’ Meeting of the WPK

Online Series

2021. 04. 19. | CO 21-13

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The Sixth cell secretaries’ meeting of the Workers’ Party of Korea was the announcement of ‘austerity measures and the popular rectification of discipline necessitated by the continued advancement of North Korea’s nuclear weapons system amidst increasing economic difficulties.’ It was an event on the path towards controlling through the ‘popular reign of terror’ the anticipated unrest and discontent from the bottom up, caused by the development of advanced strategic weapons and the continued advancement of its nuclear arsenal over the next five years that can increase bargaining leverage vis-a-vis the U.S. It also appears intended to prepare and preemptively secure the legitimacy of the governance of the regime in anticipation of ‘the pain and life of hardship’ that could occur due to a worsening economy. Anticipating the next five years in North Korea, it does not seem likely that famine and starvation to the extent of the mid-1990s will repeat absent massive natural disasters occurring in succession. This is because the various North Korean actors that have grown through the process of marketization over the past 30 years have established their own survival mechanisms of sorts. The ‘second arduous march,’ which evokes images of famine and starvation among the people of North Korea, is not what the Kim Jong-un regime truly fears. Rather, it is the abandonment of the population and grassroots organizations that have learned the ‘taste of money and freedom’ over the past 30 years. Therefore, it is necessary to observe what type of survival tactics the people and grassroots organizations in North Korea adopt in response to the Kim Jong-un regime’s ‘popular reign of terror.’

Over an eight-day period from April 6 to 13, the sixth cell secretaries' meeting of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), in addition to teaching sessions and other commemorative events that followed, was held in Pyongyang for the lowest ranking leaders within the Party. Cell leaders, referred to as secretaries, are those in charge of cells that are the most elementary unit within the WPK consisting of 5 to 30 party members. The meeting was a major event with more than 10,000 participants consisting mostly of secretaries selected from all across North Korea participating in 10 days of events, including events that were held prior to the meeting after the participants arrived in Pyongyang on April 3. It was also the most important political event that North Korea has hosted this year after the 8th Party Congress of the WPK and the 2nd Plenary meeting of the Party's Central Committee of the 8th term of the WPK that were convened between January and February of this year. This study analyzes the characteristics, implications, history, background, intent, and purpose of the sixth cell secretaries' meeting while also suggesting the prospects and the points worth the attention in the future.

Advancement of Nuclear Weapons System, the “Arduous March”, and the Rectification movement

The sixth cell secretaries' meeting can be summarized as the announcement of 'austerity measures and the popular rectification of discipline necessitated by the continued advancement of North Korea's nuclear weapons system amidst increasing economic difficulties.'¹⁾ This is linked to the policies of 'developing highly-advanced strategic weapons' and 'self-reliance,' the two pillars of North Korea's strategy for the next five years proclaimed during the 8th Party Congress. The three components of a nuclear weapons system are nuclear material, delivery systems, and detonation

1) The rectification movement are political movements launched by Mao Zedong in the 1940s with the goal of correcting improper ethos within the Chinese Communist party that continued in the 1950s and 60s. In terms of substance, it was an internal struggle within the party led by the party leadership to rectify the loss of support of the people due to the corruption of the party.

devices. Currently, North Korea is fervently working on developing highly-advanced strategic weapons and, in particular, appears to be focusing on developing delivery systems such as Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBM) and Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBM) as well as miniaturized detonation devices that can be loaded onto ballistic missiles. Significant austerity measures are necessary to implement this strategy while economic sanctions on North Korea continue to be imposed. This appears to have led Kim Jong-un to state in his address at the closing ceremony on April 8 that “I have decided that, beginning with the Central Committee of the WPK, Party organs at each level and cell secretaries across the entire party shall carry out a more difficult ‘arduous march.’²⁾” Assessments of these statements that refer to the famine in North Korea during the mid-1990s have since been suggested.

In the North Korean context, an “arduous march” basically assumes conditions under which normal life is difficult to sustain. But the term has different meanings from the ‘perspective of the regime’ and the ‘perspective of the people.’ For the regime, the meaning of the arduous march is founded upon the emphasis of the ideological and mental state with which Kim Il-sung struggled against Japanese forces from late 1938 to early 1939 during the blistering cold and severe hunger. The Chosun Sinbo, the newspaper of Chongryon, has defined the arduous march as “the courage and fighting spirit of life-and-death, and the strategy of turning crises into opportunities.”³⁾ The idea of the ‘arduous march’ that Kim Jong-il mentioned on January 1, 1996, was also stated in this sense. The same term, on the other hand, means to the people of North Korea the massive ‘famine and starvation’ that the North Korean society experienced during the mid-1990s. South Korea as well as the international community, too, views North Korea’s ‘arduous

2) Kim Jong-un, “Closing Remarks from the Sixth Cell Secretaries’ Meeting of the WPK,” *Korean Central News Agency*, April 9, 2021.

3) Chosun Sinbo. Cited from, “Chosun Sinbo Refers to Kim Jong-un’s Mention of the ‘Arduous March’...Fighting Spirit, Strategy to Turn Crises into Opportunities,” *Seoul Pyongyang News* (SPN), April 4, 2021, <http://www.spnews.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=38396> (accessed April 15, 2021).

march' in this context. Kim Jong-un's mention of the arduous was in reference to the first meaning. In other words, it should be viewed as an announcement of the demand for austerity and rectification movement based on firmer ideological grounds.

The 8th Party Congress of the WPK that was held earlier this year can be summarized as the 'proposal of a rectification movement based on the dual principles of limiting economic problems through stronger austerity, ideology, and discipline on the one hand and strengthening military power on the other.' The three main features of the Party Congress were as follows. First, while the official slogan was the principle of "our state first" and "the people first," the actual purpose was to adopt the strategy of 'self-reliance and developing highly advanced strategic weapons' as the core national policy for the next five years. Second, based on the three major ideas of "Serving the People is Serving the Heaven," "single-minded unity", and "self-reliance," the Party Congress was intended as an opportunity to revitalize and monitor the activities of Party members and to innovate the operations of Party organs. Third, it proposed the eradication of abuse of power, bureaucracy, and corruption, in addition to intra-party criticism, ideological struggle, better education, the establishment of revolutionary rules, and the enhancement of the standard and abilities of Party officials as specific tasks to be completed. These three characteristics resemble China's rectification movements.

The Prelude to 'Popular Reign of Terror' Intended to Prevent the Crisis of the Regime

The cell secretaries' meeting of the WPK was first held in 1991 as Kim Jong-il's system of leadership was being established during a tumultuous time when two Koreas joined the UN at the same time and when both China and the Soviet Union underwent systemic reform and pursued normalized relations with South Korea. Then during the Kim Jong-il era, it was convened in 1994 following the death of Kim Il-sung and when famine brought on by consecutive natural disasters began to spread, and later in 2007 when it began to strengthen its 'control over the market economy' based on the perception of the regime that marketization threatened the North Korean

system. Under the leadership of Kim Jong-un, the cell secretaries' meeting was held in 2013 when tensions were high following North Korea's third nuclear test through which it advanced its nuclear capabilities and when the faction led by Jang Song Thaek was systemically purged, and in 2017 when broad economic sanctions by the U.S. and the international community were imposed in response to North Korea's sixth nuclear test and missile test launches. The sixth cell secretaries' meeting was held this year in 2021 at a time when North Korea has begun to play the mid-to long-game following the failure of the Hanoi summit meeting with the U.S. by crafting a new negotiation strategy through enhancements to its nuclear weapons system.

As this illustrates, the cell secretaries' meeting of the WPK has generally been held when North Korea faces internal and external threats to the stability of the regime, and especially to prevent uncertainty and unrest domestically caused by foreign threats. Given this historical context, the recently hosted sixth cell secretaries' meeting of the WPK is indicative of the high degree of concern of the Kim Jong-un regime about external threats and domestic discontent. According to the bylaws of the WPK, Party cells comprise of 5 to 30 members of the Party and are defined as the "bedrock of Party activities of Party members, the basic unit that links the people and the Party while also tie the people to the control of the Party, and the unit for the direct struggle to implement policies and strategies of the Party by mobilizing members of the Party and North Korean workers," Estimating that there are approximately 4 million members in the WPK and assuming that there are 30 members per cell, it is projected that there are about 130,000 cell secretaries. Given the status and number of Party cells shown above, this year's cell secretaries' meeting can be viewed as the prelude to the 'popular reign of terror' of the Kim Jong-un regime, intended to prevent the unrest of the entire North Korean population amidst the worsening economic crisis.

Since Kim Jong-un's rise to power until the seventh Party Congress of the WPK, the Kim Jong-un regime had brutally purged high-level power elites, including their relatives, that have either failed to adequately express loyalty to Kim Jong-un or were viewed as potential threats that may destabilize the regime. In addition, it

cultivated an environment of terror among the elite class and suppressed elder members of the elite. These two methods were the main aspects of Kim Jong-un's 'reign of terror' which has focused on political elites in the past. In contrast, the anticipated 'popular reign of terror' will likely foster an environment of terror among grassroots members of the Party and the people of North Korea. Inherent in this approach is Kim Jong-un's concerns about the crisis of the regime.

A Preemptive Response to Increasing Uneasiness and Unrest due to the Economic Crisis and Increased Isolation

There are three noteworthy aspects of the sixth cell secretaries' meeting of the WPK that Kim Jong-un's statements at the opening ceremony mentioned. First is the "intensely difficult situation in which an unprecedented number of challenges need to be overcome." Second is the "rapid pace of replacement of cell secretaries and the fact that there are many cell secretaries that have just begun tasks." And third is the "need to quickly resolve the inherent deficiencies of the tasks undertaken by Party cells." Based on these assessments of the current situation, the official purpose of the cell secretaries' meeting of the WPK was to "unite the grassroots organizations that cells represent, find realistic ways to transform them into units that have the capacity to undertake the struggle and apply them, thereby shortening the path to strengthening both the Party and country while progressing the goal of constructing a socialist society."⁴) Regarding the objectives of the cell secretaries' meeting, the *Rodong Sinmun* reported that "it was a meaningful event designed to implement the decisions adopted during the eight Party Congress and radically progress the goal of constructing a socialist society by further reinforcing the monolithic guidance system centered around the leadership of Kim Jong-un and preparing Party cells to become frontline ranks that have a strong capacity to fight

4) Kim Jong-un, "Opening Remarks at the Sixth Cell Secretaries' Meeting of the WPK," *Rodong Sinmun*, April 7, 2021, front page.

and struggle to carry out Party policies unto death in a manner that the unity between the leadership of the Party and revolutionary ranks are strengthened in every possible way.”⁵⁾ Put differently, the goals of the cell secretaries’ meeting of the WPK was increasing loyalty towards Kim Jong-un, strengthening the spirit to fight and struggle among all North Korean organizations and its people, and implementing the decisions of the eighth Party Congress.

Therefore, the official objective of the meeting was to strengthen the loyalty and ideology of Party members while also to better implement the decisions of the eighth Party Congress. But beneath the surface, it appears that it was actually intended to establish rule and discipline from the lowest tiers of the Party structure and up in an environment where internal unrest and discontent is growing as a result of North Korea’s economic crisis and increasing international isolation. This is also confirmed by the Party representatives that accompanied Kim Jong-un to the opening ceremony. The group of representatives included officials from the central party in charge of ‘guiding, monitoring, controlling, regulating, and censoring all people and organizations’ within North Korea’s system under Kim Jong-un. Moreover, these officials participated in the entire event, taking pictures commemorating the meeting with Kim Jong-un on April 13.

Kim Jong-un’s Concerns and Changes from Below

According to article 45 of the bylaws of the WPK, the following tasks mandate a general assembly more than once a month; first, establishing the monolithic guidance system of the Party among Party members and workers; second, strengthening the organization for Party activities and education of Party members, as well as training grassroots leaders (rank and file entry-level workers); third, ideological training for Party members and workers as well as projects that are intended to gain the support of the people; fourth, strengthening the Party’s guidance

5) *Rodong Sinmun*, April 7, 2021, page 2.

on administrative economic tasks and group collaborative tasks; fifth, strengthening the civil defense system and supporting the military; sixth, advancing rapid popular mobilization tasks such as the “movement to acquire the three great revolutionary red flags” and the “effort to be awarded the title of Gunjari worker”; and seventh, reporting the work of cells to higher-level committees within the Party. The work of cells is detailed the most specifically among Party organizations, and most tasks are those accomplished at individual work places where North Korean people work and those that require collaboration with other Party members. But with changes in North Korea over the past thirty years best represented by the trends of marketization and informatization, there has been a considerable change in the consciousness among the people of North Korea and Party members, including the spread of materialism and individualism.

Kim Jong-un, who began his rule of North Korea in his twenties and has led top-down changes in North Korea, is well aware of these ‘changes from below.’ Therefore, it is likely that he is considerably concerned about the prospect of past policies that ‘austerity measures and reinforcing ideology’ represent may be ineffective in the field. The internal sources of such concerns can be found in the official report to the recent cell secretaries’ meeting that noted “the problem in the past of being unable to vigorously implement measures to strengthen the capacity of Party cells to struggle in accordance with the Party’s intentions.” The main issues include; first, “the inability of Party cells in authoritatively leading the task of cells intended to firmly establish the monolithic guidance system of the General Secretary of the WPK”; second, “the inability to establish organizations for Party activities and guidance methods that are based on the objective bolstering members’ loyalty to the Party,”; third, “the inability to firmly transform cell projects into those that involve interaction among people, thereby being unable to fulfill the role of becoming a direct unit for the struggle to implement the policies of the Party,”; fourth, “the inadequacy of cell secretaries that lack the features and abilities required of grassroots level political workers who are thereby unable to effectively manage popular propaganda projects,”; and fifth, “the issue of cell secretaries without Party

and revolutionary principles not forcefully undertaking the struggle against anti-socialism and counter-socialism.”⁶⁾ In other words, there appears to be a widespread lack of loyalty towards Kim Jong-un, loosening of group activities and projects, increased pursuit of individual interests, and normalization of compromises and corruption not only among the ordinary people of North Korea but also among Party members.

Nevertheless, Unable to Adopt Other Alternatives

The North Korean regime has assessed that the issue lies in the fact that the “cell secretaries lack political consciousness and administrative skills.”⁷⁾ But the underlying cause is that the lives and aspirations of the North Korean people today do not want a return to a ‘collective austerity environment centered around ideology.’ Both the Party and Kim Jong-un are aware of this fact but are unable to present an alternative under the current situation in which it is unable to actively alter its external conditions. The only option remaining is past methods that the Party has accumulated considerable know-how on; controlling the consciousness and behavior of North Korean people through the strengthening of ideology and rules centered around the absolute leader.

Therefore, this “desperately requires all North Koreans to firmly arm themselves with the revolutionary ideology and revolutionary vision of Kim Jong-un” to establish “strong revolutionary rule and order” and place at the forefront “the effort to prepare true loyalists and real revolutionaries to embark on the struggle to make Party cells the cells of loyalty.” In order to achieve this, “Party cells must become the power source behind the wave that washes away anti-socialism and counter-socialism while also engage in a fierce struggle that creates a strong wind that establishes moral discipline.”⁸⁾ Based on this notion, the meetings and discussions during the

6) *Rodong Sinmun*, April 7, 2021, page 3.

7) From the report by Jo Yong-won, *Rodong Sinmun*, April 7, 2021, page 3.

8) From the report by Jo Yong-won, *Rodong Sinmun*, April 7, 2021, page 3.

second day of proceedings at the cell secretaries' meeting called for a 'fierce struggle against corruption' and the strengthening of ideological beliefs and administrative skills.⁹⁾ This is because as Kim Jong-un noted in his remarks during the closing ceremony, North Korea "absolutely believes that there will be no serendipitous opportunities," and the only alternative is "to move the hearts of the millions of Party members and especially the several hundred thousand cell secretaries without relying on false expectations or hopes."¹⁰⁾ This is because the resiliency of the North Korean system lies in these millions of members that live within the Party system, and North Korea's most important resource is the 'cheap and diligent labor' that they provide that remains under the influence of the Party.

10 Major Tasks and 12 Fundamental Characteristics of Austerity and Devotion

The ten major tasks and the 12 fundamental characteristics required of cell secretaries to enhance the ideology and administrative skills of Party members and the people of North Korea are as follows. The ten major objectives include; ① arming with the strategies and policies of the party; ② putting at the forefront ideological education projects centered around the five major cultures of revolutionary struggle, fidelity, patriotism, anti-imperialism and anti-class, and morality; ③ strengthening education of the Party bylaws, and the normalization and institutionalization of Party activities; ④ establishing Party activity discipline and ethos; ⑤ implementing major decisions made at the Party Congress and by the Party Central Committee; ⑥ realizing the goal of domestically producing and recycling materials and resources by emphasizing the power of science and technology; ⑦ educating and training prospective Party members; ⑧ specially emphasizing the cultural education of youth; ⑨ movements to remake humans like those launched during the Chollima Era; and ⑩ the anti-socialist and counter-socialist struggle. The 12 fundamental characteristics

9) *Rodong Sinmun*, April 8, 2021, pages 1~3.

10) Kim Jong-un, "Closing Remarks from the Sixth Cell Secretaries' Meeting of the WPK," *Korean Central News Agency*, April 9, 2021.

are “Party loyalty, principlism, politicism, responsibility, leading by example, emergence, devotion to the group, humanity, truthfulness, optimism, morality, and integrity.”¹¹⁾

In addition, Kim Jong-un referenced the ‘arduous march’ in his address during the closing ceremony to stress the need for ‘members of the Party to be mothers that are the subjects of austerity and devotion.’ Examining the specific rhetoric, grassroots members were defined as those that demonstrate “the warm love and devotion of mothers,” “heroes among hidden heroes that devote to the Party without restitution,” “the Party of mothers,” and the “servants of the North Korean people.”¹²⁾ When analyzing the overall structure of his statements, it appears that the idea of a “large socialist family” constructed by the Kim Jong-il regime is being reinvoked when the system faced internal and external crises. In other words, Kim Jong-un was asking cell secretaries to lead efforts to re-establish the community of a shared destiny consisting of the “father figure in the leader, the mother figure in the Party, and the children of the family representing the people of North Korea.” Through this process, the North Korean regime is asking of grassroots members of the Party and the people of North Korea for the service, caring, and devotion as well as the “resilient” survivability that has been demanded of North Korean mothers.

A Different Reality and the Legitimacy of Governance

But it does not appear easy for North Korea to accomplish these goals. The people of North Korea and how its organizations operate can not revert back to the ‘era of subjective mentality’ of the 1950s and 1960s and the Chollima Era, or to the ‘era of unprepared massive famine’ of the 1990s. Let’s examine the reality in North Korea in which Kim Jong-un outlined the ten major tasks and the 12 fundamental

11) Kim Jong-un, “On the Main Tasks to Strengthen Party Cells during the Current Era, (conclusions from the 3rd day of conferences at the sixth cell secretaries’ meeting on April 8, 2021)” *Rodong Sinmun*, April 9, 2021, pages 1~3.

12) Kim Jong-un, “Closing Remarks from the Sixth Cell Secretaries’ Meeting of the WPK,” *Korean Central News Agency*, April 9, 2021.

characteristics. First, organizational life has loosened so much so that meetings for self-criticism or criticism on others regarding Party activities have become merely a formality, and the important methods of self-criticism and criticizing others that are central to censorship are not occurring regularly. Second, Party members are not faithfully participating in Party activities and are “trying to shirk responsibilities by making various excuses,” and the Party is full of people “that do not respect the Party organization but instead try to promote themselves,” and “people that are lazy towards Party activities and treat organizational control as noise.” Third, under the principle of science and technology, people are forced to obtain materials and resources independently and are compelled to reuse disposed materials. Fourth, “there has been a serious change in the ideological mindset of the new generation.” This issue, in particular, has become a “paramount problem that could determine the sustainability of the Party and revolution, as well as the country and the people of North Korea that can no longer be ignored.” As a result, even “clothes, hairstyle, a way of speaking, and interpersonal relationships” all need to be cultured and controlled. Fifth, “complete control over sections of the economy by certain entities (unit specialization), the trend of prioritizing group needs over national needs (self-centeredness), politics by a select number of powerful families, bureaucratism, and corruption” are widespread across almost every task and project.¹³⁾

As this shows, the Kim Jong-un regime is clearly aware of the changes to the people of North Korea and how organizations are operated due to the trends of marketization and informationalization. Moreover, these problems are the result of the past 30 years during which the people and grassroots agencies in North Korea have had to be self-dependent without being able to rely on the central government. The North Korean regime that continues to focus on the completion of its nuclear weapons system to secure the motherland of “Kim il-sung-Kim Jong-il” needs to acknowledge these changes and utilize them. Therefore, the recently held sixth cell

13) Kim Jong-un, “On the Main Tasks to Strengthen Party Cells during the Current Era, (conclusions from the 3rd day of conferences at the sixth cell secretaries’ meeting on April 8, 2021)” *Rodong Sinmun*, April 9, 2021, pages 1~3.

secretaries' meeting does not appear to have been convened based on the belief that the people of North Korea and how its organizations function can revert to the past. Rather, it appears to be intended to control through the 'popular reign of terror' the anticipated unrest and discontent from the bottom up, caused by the development of advanced strategic weapons and the continued advancement of its nuclear arsenal over the next five years that can increase bargaining leverage vis-a-vis the U.S. Moreover, there is also an indication that it is intended to prepare and preemptively secure the legitimacy of the governance of the regime in anticipation of 'the pain and life of hardship (the second arduous march)' that could occur due to a worsening economy. It can also be viewed as the Kim Jong-un regime hypothesizing various scenarios of an indigent population in North Korea that may potentially emerge as the regime continues to pursue the advancement of its nuclear weapons system under the current sanctions regime, and exploring ways to respond to each scenario.

Expectations and Aspects Worthy of the Attention

Anticipating the next five years in North Korea, it does not seem likely that famine and starvation to the extent of the mid-1990s will repeat absent massive natural disasters occurring in succession. This is because the various North Korean actors that have grown through the process of marketization over the past 30 years have established their own survival mechanisms of sorts. Specifically; first, North Koreans that experienced the famine of the 1990s have acquired the 'physical adaptability' that enables them to survive on corn porridge and small-scale production of garden vegetables; second, North Korea's grassroots organizations have also established systems that enable them to manageably function through 'self-reliant survival methods and systems of corruption' without the support from the central government; third, the North Korean regime at least ensures the survival of strategic units that uphold the system, such as the central Party and strategic forces. Furthermore, the North Korean regime itself has formed methods through which it evades sanctions to secure ruling funds through smuggling, cyber activities, and 'the expansion of

the exploitative economy from within' during the prolonged period of imposed sanctions.

The 'second arduous march,' which evokes images of famine and starvation among the people of North Korea, is not what the Kim Jong-un regime truly fears. Rather, it is the abandonment of the population and grassroots organizations that have learned the 'taste of money and freedom' over the past 30 years. The most significant threat to despotic autocracies like North Korea in the 21st century, systems in which the authority of the highest leader is absolute, is the 'withdrawal of popular support for the ruling methods of the leader.' Particularly in "autocratic predatory states" that lack natural resources and thus must depend on domestic labor to procure the resources necessary for production, the legitimacy of governance based on popular support is even more crucial.¹⁴⁾ Therefore, we must now pay attention to what types of survival tactics the people of North Korea and its grassroots organizations will adopt in response to the 'popular reign of terror' of the Kim Jong-un regime that demands coercion and austerity. Noteworthy will be the 'counteraction from the bottom' in response to the 'attack from the top' that has once again returned to the forefront. ©KINU 2021

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14) Aurel Croissant et al., *Comparing Autocracies in the Early Twenty-first Century, Volume 1: Unpacking Autocracies – Explaining Similarity and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 2014).