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# Analysis of Major Issues in the Revised Rules of the Workers' Party of Korea

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The revised rules of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) were revealed at the 8<sup>th</sup> Party Congress of the WPK held in January 2021. There were significant changes compared to the last revisions made during the 7<sup>th</sup> Party Congress convened in May 2016. First, changes were made to the pressing objectives of the Party regarding North Korea's policy on South Korean revolution. Given that this dictates North Korea's future policies and strategies vis-a-vis South Korea, such changes will have a substantial impact on inter-Korean relations and South Korea's North Korea policy. Second, the other noteworthy aspect was the installment of the position of first secretary of the Party Central Committee as a representative of Kim Jong-un. The notion of a representative is extremely symbolic considering North Korea's monolithic *Suryong* leadership system. Therefore, much attention is being paid to what roles the first secretary will assume and who will be appointed. This study analyzes and discusses the implications of these two controversial aspects of the revised rules of the WPK: the deletion of the phrase regarding North Korea's policy on South Korean revolution and the installment of the first secretary.

## A Question of Whether North Korea has Abandoned South Korean Revolution Policy

In North Korea, the recent revisions to the rules of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) deleted from the pressing objectives of the Party the pursuit of a 'democratic revolution for national liberation and democracy' at a nationwide scale, replacing it with the goal of realizing the 'independent and democratic development of society.' Since the pressing objectives of the WPK are the clauses that define North Korea's views on South Korean revolution, it is natural to question whether the North Korean regime has abandoned its policy on South Korean revolution. Based on North Korea's decision to delete the phrase 'a democratic revolution for national liberation and democracy' from the Party's rules, some experts conclude that "it is incorrect to assume that North Korea is seeking unification, and that North Korea has also given up on a South Korean revolution." Are such claims justified?

Assertions that North Korea has given up on unification or on South Korean revolution are hasty. This is because the goal of realizing an 'independent and democratic development of society' at a nationwide scale is merely an elaboration of a 'democratic revolution for national liberation and democracy.' The 'independent development of society' refers to the national liberation revolution through which South Korea escapes from U.S. imperialistic control, whereas the 'democratic development of society' means the establishment of a socialist society through a people's democratic revolution in South Korea. As a matter of fact, the preamble of the revised rules of the WPK clearly refer to a revolution for national liberation in South Korea by stipulating the "demolition of America's armed invasion and the eventual eradication of America's political and military control over South Korea."

The fact that North Korea still maintains its policy of a 'democratic revolution for national liberation and democracy' is apparent when examining how its South Korean revolution policy has developed. North Korea first proposed the policy of an 'anti-imperialist, anti-feudal democratic revolution' during the 3<sup>rd</sup> Party Congress of the WPK held in 1956. The revolution vis-a-vis South Korea was defined both as a revolution for national liberation and an anti-feudal revolution. North Korea viewed that South Korean society of the 1950s and 60s had strong feudalistic

characteristics and defined a revolution against South Korea as an anti-feudal revolution that opposes the feudal power.

North Korea's South Korean revolution policy has changed at the 5<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 1970. North Korea redefined that South Korea carries the characteristics of a capitalist society. At the performance assessment report of the Central Committee, Kim Il-sung defined South Korean revolution as a national liberation revolution and a people's democratic revolution. In other words, North Korea declared South Korean revolution as "a people's democratic revolution that opposes the likes of landlords(informants for Americans), capitalists(sympathizers for Americans), reactionary beauracrats, and their military-fascist ruling."

The rules of the WPK were officially revised at the 6<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 1980. The 1980 party rules deleted the word "anti-feudal" and defined South Korean revolution as a national liberation revolution and a people's democratic revolution. The policy of a 'democratic revolution for national liberation and democracy' was presented at the 7<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2016 by erasing the term 'people's,' and this was rephrased as the 'independent and democratic development of society' in 2021.

Regardless, the fundamental nature of North Korea's policy of South Korean revolution has never changed. North Korea's South Korean revolution policy consists of a revolution of national liberation to escape from the rule of American imperialism on the one hand, and a socialist revolution by overthrowing the South Korean government on the other. The revolution for national liberation refers to the expulsion of American imperialists from South Korea and ending their political rule. North Korea has described this as anti-U.S. independence. Meanwhile, the (people's) democratic revolution is a socialist revolution achieved through the defeat of the South Korean government. North Korea has described this as anti-dictatorial democratization. North Korea has maintained these views in the rules of the WPK revised in 2021.

Then why did North Korea delete the term a 'democratic revolution for national liberation and democracy' and replace it with an 'independent and democratic development of society'? It seems that North Korea is attempting to expanding the idea of South Korean revolution to include a revolution through elections that utilizes the legal political space. This is because the democratic development of society

includes not only the people's democratic revolution but also governing through elections. The policy of democratic revolution for national liberation and democracy stated in the rules of the WPK in 2016 failed to reflect changes of South Korean society. The political landscape and revolutionary capacity in South Korea have changed rapidly since the Kim Young-sam administration. As military dictatorships have collapsed and democratic transitions of power between governments have repeatedly occurred in South Korea, the influence of radical socialist actors and student movements that pursue armed uprisings have decreased dramatically. The prospects for success of a people's democratic revolution through popular uprisings that were advocated by student movements and socialists in South Korea until the 1990s have been reduced.

In contrast, there is the possibility that a pro-North Korean party may gain power through elections in the legal political space as South Korea's democracy has matured. The Democratic Labor Party (DLP) entered the legal political space after its foundation in January 2000, while the Unified Progressive Party (UPP) was founded as a coalition between the DLP, The Participation Party, and the New Progressive Coalition Alliance (those that left the New Progressive Party) in December 2011. The UPP had hoped to form a parliamentary party by securing 20 seats in the South Korean National Assembly during the 2012 general elections but only managed to win 13 seats. Though the UPP managed to build foundations for entry into the National Assembly, it was charged with the crime of conspiring to plot an insurrection and was subsequently ordered to disband by the South Korean constitutional court. Nevertheless, the UPP's participation in the National Assembly demonstrated that a similar political party may be able to rule through elections or join an administration by forming a coalition government.

North Korea has changed the term a 'democratic revolution for national liberation and democracy' to an 'independent and democratic development of society' so that its policy of South Korean revolution not only includes military unification and popular uprisings but also revolutions through elections. In the future, North Korea will actively try to use the establishment of legal political parties and election tactics to exploit South Korea's legal political space. But even if North Korea exploits South

Korea's legal political space, it is nevertheless difficult for a pro-North Korea party to succeed politically given its inherent limitations, as demonstrated by the case of the UPP.

### **New Installment of the First Secretary of the Party Central Committee**

The revised rules of the WPK newly installed the position of the first secretary of the Central Committee of the WPK and defined its role as “the representative of the General Secretary of the WPK.” The installment of the position of the first secretary portends a significant change to the power structure in North Korea. There have been competing claims that the position of the first secretary indicates either a succession structure or a delegation of Party responsibilities. The status and role of the first secretary will be clarified by observing who is appointed. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Plenary Meeting of the 8<sup>th</sup> Central Committee of the WPK, which has been announced to convene during the first half of June, will provide an indication of who will fill this role. More significant are the political implications in each of the following possibilities.

North Korea experts anticipate either Kim Yo-jong or Jo Yong-won to be appointed as first secretary. First, if Kim Yo-jong is appointed, this indicates that the first secretary is related to the succession process following Kim Jong-un. Kim Yo-jong's appointment to the first secretary can only be interpreted as a move intended for succession given that she has no experience overseeing Party organ leadership and is only a deputy director. Born in 1984, Kim Jong-un is only 38 years old and his children are still young. There is no reason to prepare for succession after his death or to speed up the process of naming his successor. The appointment of Kim Yo-jong to the first secretary is thus likely to be intended to prepare for contingencies possibly precipitated by the health of Kim Jong-un.

There are no regulations in the rules of the WPK regarding the death of the General Secretary. In an article titled “When Dictators Die” published in the Journal of Democracy, Erica Frantz argues that the absence of a successor causes greater uncertainty in personalistic dictatorships, but the death of the leader does not cause

a power struggle when the successor has been chosen. Both Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il prepared for the death of the General Secretary by nominating their respective successors. Kim Il-sung chose Kim Jong-il to be his successor in 1974 at the age of 63, while Kim Jong-il named Kim Jong-un as his successor in 2008 at the age of 67 soon after he suffered a stroke. Given this context, if Kim Jong-un has serious health issues, appointing a representative that will take care of the issue of succession is required to eliminate any uncertainty caused by a power vacuum that will arise in contingent situations.

On the other hand, if Jo Yong-won, a permanent member of the political bureau and current organization secretary, is appointed, the first secretary position may be an attempt to delegate Party responsibilities to lessen the workload of Kim Jong-un. Due to the nature of the *Suryong* leadership system of North Korea, all major Party, military, and political decisions are concentrated on the leader. The amount of documents that Kim Jong-un has to approve daily is massive, while work-related stress is also expected to be considerable. In the past, Kim Jong-un has delegated authority to core high-ranking officials to reduce the workload and govern effectively. For example, policies on South Korea and the U.S. were delegated to deputy director Kim Yo-jong, the economy and the cabinet to vice-chairman of the WPK Pak Bong-ju and Premier of North Korea Kim Tok-hun, and military affairs to the director of military affairs of the WPK Choe Pu-il and Ri Pyong-chol, permanent member of the Central Committee and Vice-Chairman of the Central Military Commission.

Given this context, it is possible that the installment of the first secretary of the Central Committee is intended to delegate Party responsibilities in order to reduce the burden of Kim Jong-un. The role of the first secretary can be perceived as overseeing the seven secretaries of the Party Central Committee, including Jo Yong-won (organization), Pak Thae-song (propaganda), Ri Pyong-chol (military), Jong Sang-hak (auditing), Ri Il-hwan (workers and social organization), Kim Tu-il (economy), and Choe Sang-gon (science education). If Jo Yong-won is appointed as the first secretary, it is expected that he will continue to serve as an organization secretary and manage day-to-day responsibilities as well as concurrently assisting

Kim Jong-un with his control of the Party.

## Summary and Conclusion

This study analyzed the pressing objectives of the WPK and the installment of the first secretary position as two core aspects of the revisions to the rules of the WPK in 2021. It is difficult to perceive the deletion of the term a ‘democratic revolution for national liberation and democracy’ from the Party’s pressing objectives and the newly proposed notion of an ‘independent and democratic development of society’ as an indication that North Korea has abandoned its policy of South Korean revolution. This is because the idea of an ‘independent and democratic development of society’ appears to be intended to expand North Korea’s policy of South Korean revolution to include a revolution through elections that exploits the legal political space in South Korea, all the while maintaining its policy of a democratic revolution for national liberation and democracy. Thus, North Korea will sustain its existing policies vis-a-vis South Korea while also seeking to establish legal political parties to utilize elections in South Korea.

The implications of the installment of the first secretary position, including its status and role, need to be assessed based on who is appointed. The first secretary position will be related to succession politics if Kim Yo-jong is appointed, while it can be interpreted as an attempt to delegate Party responsibilities and reduce Kim Jong-un’s workload if Jo Yong-won is chosen. If the position is left vacant without an official appointed, this may also indicate that it is intended for succession. The politics of succession is expected to be managed by Kim Yo-jong. Regardless of whether it is more related to succession or the delegation of Party responsibilities, it will nevertheless bring considerable change to the power structure in North Korea that maintains a monolithic leadership system centered around the *Suryong*. ©KINU 2021

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