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‘Kim-Jong-un-ism’? Or ‘Kim Jong-un Thought’?

Kim, Kap-Sik

(Senior Research Fellow, Unification Policy Research Division)

JANG, Cheol-wun

(Research Fellow, Unification Policy Research Division)

The Kim Jong-un regime started to establish an independent ideological system, different from its predecessors, using the term ‘Kim-Jong-un-ism.’ At the 8th Party Congress held in January 2021, North Korea defined ‘Kim-il-sung-Kim-Jong-il-ism’ as ‘the only guiding ideology.’ In the past, Kim Il-sung presented Juche Ideology as the official ideology and Kim Jong-il, Military-first (Songun) ideology. China adopted Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, and Deng Xiaoping Theory as the guiding ideology. The so-called ‘Xi Jinping Thought’ was added to the official line of China’s ideology in 2017. Under this context, Kim Jong-un regime’s new emerging ideology can be more adequately called ‘Kim Jong-un Thought.’ In fact, an appeal adopted at the 5th “3rd Revolution Pioneer Conference” in November 2021 emphasized the need to ‘instill Kim Jong-un’s revolutionary thought into North Korean society.’ Against this backdrop, the Kim Jong-un regime’s new ideology is likely to be made up of ‘Our People-First principle,’ ‘Our State-First principle,’ ‘The doctrine of self-reliance (*Charkyok Kaengsaeng*),’ all of which had been emphasized so far. ‘Kim-il-sung-Kim-Jong-il-ism’ will likely become an abstract, pure ideology after a new ideology is born.

Into the ten years since Kim Jong-un came into power, the North Korean regime reportedly started to establish an independent ideological system, different from its predecessors. The National Intelligence Service (NIS) reported in a closed, parliamentary audit on October 28, 2021, that North Korea began to establish an independent ideological system, internally using the term ‘Kim-Jong-un-ism.’ The deputy spokesperson of the Unification Ministry Cha Deok-Cheol said of this report that a day after NIS’s parliamentary audit, “North Korea reportedly attempted to raise its political standing marking the 10th anniversary of Kim Jong-un’s rule” and that “North Korea practically has secured the political standing equal to the level of Kim Jong-un’s predecessors by promoting Chairman Kim Jong-un as the general secretary of the Party and naming him ‘the head’ through the revision of the bylaws of the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK).

North Korean media outlets, such as Rodong Sinmun and Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) have yet to use the term ‘Kim-Jong-un-ism.’ If what was reported at the NIS’s parliamentary audit were true, the so-called ‘Kim-il-sung-Kim-Jong-il-ism’ maintained over the last decade since Kim Jong-un came into power is soon expected to be replaced by new ideology ‘Kim-Jong-un-ism.’ However, such an expectation is not aligned with the announcement of the 8th Party Congress (held in January 2021) that “the WPK is a party that upholds the ideology of Kim-il-sung-Kim-Jong-il-ism” and “the WPK considers Kim-il-sung-Kim-Jong-il-ism to be the only guiding ideology.” It is hard to understand that the new guiding ideology takes the detailed form of ‘Kim-Jong-un-ism’ not long after the 8th Party Congress.

Although North Korea might revise some part of the party’s guiding ideology in WPK’s bylaws by holding the Conference of Party Representatives and the Plenary Meeting of the Central Committee of the WPK, such a possibility appears to be slim. In fact, the 4th Conference of Party Representatives of April 2012 was the only instance, in which the party bylaws were revised not through the party congress but through the procedures since Kim Jong-un came into power. To see ‘Kim-Jong-un-ism’ make its way into being codified in the party bylaws as a new overarching ideology, one must wait until the 9th Party Congress. Under the Kim

Jong-un era, North Korea started to revive the past practice of holding the party congress every five years. In other words, North Korea needs to wait until 2026 for the 'Kim-Jong-un-ism' to be codified into the party bylaws and thus secure legitimacy as a new ideology, but it does not appear realistic.

Ideology generally functions as the ideological foundation that will enable securing the legitimacy of the political rule, setting political goals, establishing the policy direction, persuading and mobilizing the residents in one country or a society. In Suryong-centered socialist countries, such as North Korea, only Suryong could present ideology. His successor is only one who can adhere to, impose, develop, and add the elements to the set ideology. That is why the ideology issue is directly related to the political reputation of the supreme leader under a socialist country. The basic ideology of the Party-State System-based socialist country is 'Marxism-Leninism.' North Korea, at the initial stage of the country's foundation, has set 'Marxism-Leninism' as its fundamental ideology. However, as Kim Il-sung rose to the rank of Suryong, 'Juche Ideology,' which was independently developed by Kim Il-sung, was adopted as a new ideology replacing 'Marxism-Leninism.' In the Kim Jong-il era, 'military-first (Songun) ideology' promoted by Kim Il-sung was presented as ideology of North Korea. In the Kim Jong-un era, 'Kim-il-sung-Kim-Jong-il-ism' has been firmly established as a new ideology until now.

It is worth reviewing the case of China, the only existing socialist country who shares borders directly with North Korea and has close political and diplomatic ties with the North. Whenever the leader in China takes office, a new guiding ideology has been presented, which is reflected in the Party Constitution of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which is equal to North Korea's party bylaws. The 19th Party Constitution, revised in 2017, specifies Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, and the Three Representatives (Jiang Zemin), the Scientific Development Concept (Hu Jintao), and China-specific socialist ideology of the Xi Jinping era. In general, it is called 'The Three Representatives theory.'

Some interpreted that such ideologies of the Chinese leader are characterized

by some kinds of hierarchy. In other words, the importance is given in the descending order from ‘OO-ism(主義) being the highest- OO-thought(思想) - OO-theory(理論,) - OO-statement(論) - OO-view(觀) being the lowest.’ Under this context, it could be interpreted that CCP Chairman Xi Jinping rose to the ranks of Mao Zedong, the founder of the People’s Republic of China, surpassing the ranks of Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Deng Xiaoping, with the inclusion of the so-called ‘Xi Jinping Thought’ into the 19th Party Constitution .

The NIS must have reported at parliamentary audit based on the results of in-depth analysis on numerous information deduced from various routes that the term ‘Kim-Jong-un-ism’ has been used in North Korea and that the Kim Jong-un regime started to establish its ideological system differentiated from its predecessors. However, the expression ‘Kim-Jong-un-ism’ does not seem to be linked with Kim Il-sung’s Juche Ideology and Kim Jong-il’s military-first (Songun) ideology, which represents changes in ideology throughout North Korea’s history. In terms of the sound of the new term, ‘Kim Jong-un Thought’ seems more adequate than ‘Kim-Jong-un-ism(-ism).’ The expression ‘Kim Jong-un Thought’ appears to be in harmony with ‘Xi Jinping Thought’ highlighted by China than the expression ‘Kim-Jong-un-ism.’

The clues can be found at the 5th “3rd Revolution Pioneer Conference” in November 2021 in Pyongyang. In an ending ceremony, the conference adopted an appeal stating, “Let’s rise up to a more developed and prosperous socialist power under the banner of three great revolutions.” an appeal stresses that “The essence and the priority of the current ideological revolution lies at spreading and instilling commander Kim Jong-un’s revolutionary thought in every corner of the society.” ‘Kim Jung-un’s revolutionary thought’ appear to point to the general discourse of the ideological aspects either so far presented or will be presented by Chairman Kim Jong-un. Over the last decade after Kim Jong-un took power, ‘Our People-First principle,’ ‘Our State-First principle,’ the ‘principle of self-strength first’ were laid out building on the ideology of ‘Kim-il-sung-Kim-Jong-il-ism.’ As such, various discourses are likely to emerge in the future in the process of establishing an independent ideology

of the Kim Jong-un regime, different from his predecessors. Against this backdrop, North Korea appears to use the term 'Kim Jong-un's revolutionary thought' utilizing general theory. Various discourses, accumulated and matured, will give birth to the new ideology, which the Kim Jong-un regime can then make official.

Whether the new ideology can be called 'Kim-Jong-un-ism' or 'Kim Jong-un Thought,' may be a minor issue. Regardless of the naming, the new ideology is likely to be not that much different from the 'People-First principle,' the 'State-First principle,' 'The doctrine of self-reliance(Charkyok Kaengsaeng),' all of which were highlighted under the banner of 'Kim-il-sung-Kim-Jong-il-ism' over the last decade of the Kim Jong-un regime. Given that the new ideology contains the name of Chairman Kim Jong-un, unlike Juche Ideology and Military-first (Songun) ideology, the new ideology is likely to be promoted as Chairman Kim's independent ideology. Such an ideology inherited the predecessors' ideologies and achievements and at the same time is different from them in some aspects.

In the meantime, once Kim Jong-un regime's new ideology becomes officialized in North Korea, North Korea's ideology is expected to be divided into pure ideology and practical ideology and become hierarchical : the former refers to an ideology that 'provides coherent and conscious world-view to individuals' and the latter indicates an ideology that 'provides rational tools for individuals to behave.' After Juche Ideology was adopted as North Korea's official ideology under the Kim Il-sung era, the existing ideology 'Marxism-Leninism' shifted to pure ideology and the new 'Juche Ideology' took the place of practical ideology. Under the Kim Jong-il era, Juche Ideology became a pure ideology and the newly presented Military-first (Songun) ideology became a practical ideology. In this context, Kim Jong-un's new ideology, which is likely to become officialized in the future, is practical ideology. 'Kim-il-sung-Kim-Jong-il-ism,' which had been North Korea's ideology over the last ten years of the Kim Jong-un regime's initial terms of office, is likely to become an abstract, pure ideology. ©KINU 2021

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