

# **Sectoral Assessment of Kim Jong-un's Decade in Power: The Creation and Stabilization of the Kim Jong-un Regime's Monolithic Rule**

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This article analyzes the elite and popular control policies pursued by Kim Jong-un upon inheriting power, which aimed at creating and stabilizing a system of monolithic rule. His elite management strategies involved purging core elites who had formed part of a guardianship system, and reconstituting the ruling coalition so as to induce loyalty amongst the elite. His popular policies sought to check and reverse the disaffection with the regime through the pursuit of what was termed a 'popular masses first' policy. Over a decade in charge, Kim's elite and popular policies have proven successful in constructing and stabilizing a system of monolithic rule.

**Keywords:** Kim Jong-un, Ruling Coalition, Purges, Popular Control, Popular Masses First

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## I . Introduction

This article aims to analyze the elite and popular control policies of the Kim Jong-un regime over the past decade in order to assess their successes and limitations in the construction of a monolithic leadership system and the stabilization of the new regime's powerbase. It was unclear when Kim took office whether he could stabilize the regime under his authority. Prior to his internal selection as successor in late 2008, he had no political power, nor any political accomplishments. And he only had three years, between 2009 and 2011, to learn how to lead the country.

Kim Jong-un had to overcome two important challenges in order to stabilize his grip on power. First, he had to deal with the challenge of the elites that comprised the ruling coalition, and second, he had to face down potential popular opposition. These are the two challenges that autocratic regimes must resolve in order to survive.<sup>1</sup> Autocrats respond to the former through elite policies, while they face the latter through measures that target the masses. They have two important tools when making elite and popular policies: repression and co-optation.<sup>2</sup> Dictators use repression to control elites and the masses. Dictators who lack a strong state apparatus of repression face a high chance of losing power.<sup>3</sup> Co-optation involves overpaying supporters with rents in the form of political power, economic wealth and privileges, ideological satisfaction, social honors *inter alia* in excess of their real value for their loyalty and in order to foster unity.<sup>4</sup>

Elite policies aim to prevent elite challenges, strengthen the cohesion of

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1 Milan W. Svobik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 2; Andrea Kendall-Taylor, Natasha Lindstaedt, and Erica Frantz, *Democracies & Authoritarian Regimes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 102-107.

2 *Ibid.*, 107-111.

3 Eva Bellin, "The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective," *Comparative Politics* 36, no. 2 (2004): 141~143.

4 Ronald Wintrobe, *The Political Economy of Dictatorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 38-39.

the elite system, and induce loyalty. Kim Jong-un reconstituted the ruling coalition through purges. Kim Jong Il had established a guardianship system of his own clients to support his son's succession. However, the members of the guardianship system had not been checked for their loyalty to Kim Jong-un. Kim Jong-un removed the members of the guardianship system who he could not trust or who he saw as threatening and reconstituted the ruling coalition. The new ruling coalition was composed of elites whose loyalty to Kim had been vetted.<sup>5</sup> Many members of the guardianship system were purged. These large-scale purges made the elite believe that Kim Jong-un was strong, that challenges to his power would not be tolerated, and that any elite attempt on power would fail.<sup>6</sup>

Kim Jong-un provided appropriate compensation to maintain the loyalty of elites. He constructed a system of compensation that made elites believe that if they were loyal, they would be rewarded with the possibility of high office within the Party.<sup>7</sup> What is more, the core elite also enjoyed the privilege of the highest standards of clothing, food, and housing. Their children were classed as members of the core strata, and thus accorded privileged access to education, party membership, employment, promotions et al. Further, promotion to high-level positions brings with it economic wealth. Promotion to high office allows elites more access to rent seeking opportunities.

Popular policies aim to induce spontaneous support amongst the masses and prevent political opposition from arising. All dictatorial regimes must obtain the support of the masses in order to control society. Whether the people enthusiastically support the regime, or merely respond to repression with compliance, if the masses can be mobilized, then dictatorial regimes survive. If support from the people is insufficient, this energizes the anti-regime opposition.<sup>8</sup> Following the succession of power,

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5 Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith, *The Dictator's Handbook: Why Bad Behavior is Almost Always Good Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), 10.

6 Gordon Tullock, *Autocracy* (Boston: Kluwer Academic, 1987), 151-166.

7 *Ibid.*

8 Natasha M. Ezrow and Erica Frantz, *Dictators and Dictatorships: Understanding Authoritarian Regimes and Their Leaders* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 55.

the people were uncertain whether to support Kim Jong-un. This is because they had learnt little about him following his emergence as a successor in 2009. Obtaining the support of the masses was a core task facing the nascent Kim Jong-un regime, and it acted accordingly.

The Kim Jong-un regime's popular policies had two sides. On the one hand, they blocked avenues to political opposition through the existing systems of surveillance and repression. On the other, they sought the spontaneous support of the North Korean people. The Kim Jong-un regime emphasized the Mount Paekdu bloodline in order to firmly establish Kim Jong-un's legitimacy, and constructed the image of a "people's leader." While pursuing a "people-centered policy," the regime asserted that "a popular-masses first politics" was fundamental to the way politics under socialism should be carried out.

This article is divided into five parts. The second part discusses the theoretical background and analytical framework. The third part analyzes the Kim Jong-un regime's elite policies, while the fourth considers its popular policies. The fifth sets out conclusions.

## II. Theoretical Background

In all political systems, professional politicians act as political entrepreneurs in a self-interested manner to ensure their survival and to maintain their position.<sup>9</sup> In a manner of speaking, all seek "to come to power, to stay in power and, to the extent that they can, to keep control over money."<sup>10</sup> Under dictatorial systems, political institutionalization and transparency are low,<sup>11</sup> and uncertainty and the possibility of violence rule

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9 Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York: HarperPrennial, 1975), 269-273; Barbara Geddes, *Politician's Dilemma: Building State Capacity in Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 24-42.

10 Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith, *The Dictator's Handbook: Why Bad Behavior is Almost Always Good Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2012), 10.

11 In this article, we use "dictatorship" and "authoritarian system" interchangeably.

the political sphere. In this kind of environment, politicians' pursuit of survival is necessarily extreme. This is because the moment power is lost, one falls from one's social and economic position and one can also lose one's life. Thus the dictator will use all their energies to stabilize their rule.<sup>12</sup>

The largest task facing a dictator is survival. To survive, the dictator must block potential challenges from the elite, and the threat of uprising from below. The key to maintaining the stability of dictatorship is preventing an elite challenge. The threat to a dictator of potentially losing in an elite power struggle or falling to a coup d'état is very high.<sup>13</sup> Between 1946 and 2008, more than two-thirds of dictators were removed by coups or revolts from inside the elite.<sup>14</sup> And between 1946 and 2004, some 47% of dictators who lost power met a harsh fate in the form of prison, exile, or even death.<sup>15</sup> Dictators who preside over personalist regimes, in particular, face a higher possibility of an unpleasant fate than military or single-Party regime dictators.<sup>16</sup>

Dictators must also block potential threats from below. All dictatorial regimes must attain the support of the masses to gain control over society. Dictators, so long as they can mobilize the people, regardless of whether they receive the enthusiastic support of the masses, or their compliance in the face of oppression, they can survive. When the support of the people for the regime is insufficient, resistance movements become more active.<sup>17</sup> Under dictatorial regimes, the death of a dictator is highly likely to lead to regime change if pro-democracy protests occur.<sup>18</sup>

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12 Mesquita and Smith, *The Dictator's Handbook*, 11-12.

13 Geddes, Barbara, Joseph G. Wright, and Erica Frantz, *How Dictatorships Work* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 170; Erica Frantz, *Authoritarianism: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 125.

14 Milan W. Slolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*, 5.

15 Escriba-Folch, Abel, "Accountable for What? Regime Types, Performance, and the Fate of Outgoing Dictators, 1946-2004," *Democratization* 20, no. 1 (2013): 160.

16 *Ibid.*, 176.

17 Natasha M. Ezrow, and Erica Frantz, *Dictators and Dictatorships: Understanding Authoritarian Regimes and Their Leaders*, 55.

The popular policies of authoritarian regimes are two-sided. First, the regime does not treat all its people equally. It provides incentives to its supporters through institutions. This is because the people respond to the incentives provided by the regime.<sup>19</sup> Incentives to supporters represent the core of political rule for dictatorial regimes. Such regimes levy taxes to acquire the resources in order to provide incentives to their supports.<sup>20</sup> All available means are mobilized to secure the necessary resources for the maintenance of the regime.

Opponents are thoroughly repressed or taxed.<sup>21</sup> Where dictatorial regimes are generous in their treatment of political opposition, this can deepen regime instability. More repressive dictatorships do not permit the existence of independent civic organizations, and do not allow their citizens to have political freedoms or freedoms of association and protest. If opposition protests occur, they are suppressed ruthlessly, with protestors potentially gunned down if needed be. Even if the people oppose the dictatorial regime, they are often thoroughly blocked from organizing anti-government protests.

Following his succession to power, Kim Jong-un's major task was to prevent either an elite challenge or a popular rebellion. He had forces that were far superior to the elites of the ruling coalition. Hereditary succession is an indicator that proves the consolidation of a personalist dictatorial system.<sup>22</sup>

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18 Andrea Kendall-Taylor, Natasha Lindstaedt, and Erica Frantz, "When Dictators Die," *Journal of Democracy* 27 (October, 2016).

19 Ronald Wintrobe, *The Political Economy of Dictatorship*, 4; Natasha M. Ezrow and Erica Frantz, *Dictators and Dictatorships: Understanding Authoritarian Regimes and Their Leaders*, 55-56.

20 Bruce Bueno De Mesquita et al., *The Logic of Political Survival*, 26; Mesquita, Bueno de and Alastair Smith, *The Dictator's Handbook: Why Bad Behavior is Almost Always Good Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2012), 25, 75.

21 Ronald Wintrobe, *The Political Economy of Dictatorship*, p. 4; Natasha M. Ezrow, and Erica Frantz, *Dictators and Dictatorships: Understanding Authoritarian Regimes and Their Leaders*, 55-56.

22 Jason Brownlee, "Hereditary Succession in Modern Autocracies," *World Politics* 59, no. 4 (2007): 595-628.

North Korea has concentrated high level of power in the hands of its supreme leader, and has done so now over three generations. This means that all potential competitors have either been removed or made into clients.

Yet, in spite of the fact that Kim possessed considerable power, his succession was the most dangerous moment he faced. Even when power succession occurs from within the ruling coalition in accordance with processes recognized as legitimate, the replacement of the top leader is a hazardous time.<sup>23</sup> It is unclear whether ruling elites who have been obedient to the previous leader will be loyal to the blood successor who has yet to gain a firm grip on power. Periods of power succession in a personalist dictatorial system are the time when the future of the regime is decided – the ultimate test of the regime's durability.<sup>24</sup>

Kim Jong Il received sufficient guidance under his healthy father's tutelage and was the object of an idolization campaign for a sustained period long before he actually took over the reins of power. From the mid-1970s,<sup>25</sup> with the position of "Party Center" that connoted his status as successor he was able to form a patrimonial ruling coalition.<sup>26</sup> As dictator, he also had sufficient time to acquire the necessary political and organizational experience.<sup>27</sup> However, in late 2011, Kim Jong-un succeeded his father to

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23 Seweryn Bialer, *Stalin's Successors: Leadership, Stability, and Change in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 184-185.

24 Gordon Tullock, *Autocracy* (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1987), pp. 151-166.

25 Under Kim Jong Il's leadership, the North Korean-style personalistic system centered on the dictator was firmly established programmatically by the Ten Principles on the Firm Establishment of the Party's Monolithic Ideological System in 1974. The unveiling of these principles can be seen as an official announcement of Kim Jong Il's succession. In-ho Song, "Considering the Ten Principles on the Firm Establishment of the Party's Monolithic Ideological System," *Legal Theses* 43, no. 1 (2019): 145-176.

26 Alexandre Y. Mansourov, "Emergence of the Second Republic: The Kim Regime Adapts to the Challenges of Modernity," in *North Korea: The Politics of Regime Survival*, eds. Young Whan Kihl and Hong Nack Kim (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2007), pp. 37-58.

27 Tae-seop Lee, "The Establishment of the Kim Jong Il Successor System and the Politics of 'Unity'," *Review of North Korean Studies* 6, no. 1 (2003): 11-51.

power just three years after being designated as a successor. Kim Jong-un took the reins of power with the support of a guardianship system composed of his father's clients.<sup>28</sup> In spite of Kim Jong-un's lack of political experience, he was forced to rapidly stabilize power by putting down elite challenges and dealing with potential popular opposition, while inducing popular support and loyalty. During his decade in power, Kim Jong-un has pursued survival and to stabilize his power through a distinct set of policies targeting the elite and the masses.

### III. Controlling the Ruling Elite

#### 1. The politics of purges and the reconstruction of the monolithic system of rule

The secret to the North Korean system's longevity is its patrimonial ruling elite management. However, in spite of this strong tradition of patrimonial dictatorship, the Kim Jong-un regime faced a harsh set of circumstances in its early stages that put its survival in doubt.<sup>29</sup> On both the domestic and foreign front, the environment was unenviable: economic collapse, international isolation, the spread of markets,<sup>30</sup> and declining loyalty amongst the North Korean public. The Kim Jong-un regime had no choice but to be harsher in its control policies if it was to induce loyalty amongst the elite and the general public.

The first task facing Kim Jong-un in stabilizing his grip on power was to assert control over the guardianship system that had aided his succession. The elites who had aided Kim Jong-un were a group of his father's clients. The

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28 Jin-Ha Kim, "The Kim Jong-un Regime's Policies Toward South Korea: Analysis of the Origins of Its Circular Provocation Strategy and Its Patterns since the Succession of Power," *National Defense Research* 57, no. 1 (2014): 46-47.

29 Jin-Ha Kim, "North Korea's Succession Plan: Stability and Future Outlook," Korea University Ilmin International Research Institute (IIRI)-MacArthur Foundation Working Paper, no. 8 (December 2010).

30 Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, *Witness to Transformation: Refugee Insights into North Korea* (Washington, DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2011), 45-118.



people who had stood beside Kim Jong Il's hearse, Jang Song Thaek, Kim Ki Nam, Choe Thae Bok, Ri Yong Ho, Kim Yong Chun, Kim Jong Gak, and U Dong Chuk were key members of the guardianship system. However, they also could potentially become the biggest obstacles to the creation of a monolithic power system. This is because they could lead elite resistance and revolt. Jang Song Thaek, in particular, was a potential threat to the stability of Kim Jong-un's power.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, Kim Jong-un removed the core elites of the guardianship system that he could not trust. Through large-scale purges, he averted the possibility of elite challenge, and was able to bring the security services that they had managed fully under his control.<sup>32</sup> Prior to fully consolidating his grip on power at the 7<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2016, Kim Jong-un purged elites that he did not trust. As can be seen in the <Table III-1> below, over the first five years of his rule, Kim Jong-un purged or executed some 260 senior Party, state, and military officials.

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31 Ken E. Gause, *North Korean House of Cards: Leadership Dynamics under Kim Jong-un* (Washington, DC: Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2015), 39.

32 Seung-yeol Lee, "Changes in North Korea's Ruling Bureaucracy under Kim Jong-un and Its Policy Implications," *National Assembly Legislative Survey Office NARS Current Issues Analysis*, no. 100 (December 31, 2019), 1.

<Table 1> Size of purges during Kim Jong-un's first five years (2012~16)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	Total	
#	Killed	5	30	40	60	Unknown	130
	Purged	5	30	100	130	30	260
Officials executed/purged	Kim Chol (Ministry of People's Armed Forces Vice Minister) Pak Yong Mu (Director Secretariat) Ri Yong Ho (Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff)	Jang Song Thaek Ri Yong Ha Jang Su Gil Paek Yong Chol around 30 individuals	Pak Chun Hong Kim Kun Sop Mun Kyong Dok Pyon In Son Ma Won Chun around 36 individuals executed	Jo Yong Nam (Deputy Chairman of the State Planning Commission) Hyon Yong Chol (Minister of People's Armed Forces) Choe Yong Gon (Deputy Premier) Rim Jong Chu (Ministry of State Security) Kim Ok (Secretariat) etc.	Kim Yong Jin (Deputy Premier)	*2017 Ministry of State Security and five others executed(Kim Won Hong) Hwang Pyong So(purged)	

\* Source: Oh Gyeong-seob et al., *Composition and Dynamics of the Kim Jong-un Regime Core Elite Group* (Seoul: Korean Institute for National Unification, 2019), p. 153.

Military-first politics under Kim Jong Il led to the military becoming bloated. It was thus the military that became the main target. Acquiring control over the armed forces was crucial in determining the fate of the Kim Jong-un regime. Kim Jong-un strengthened his control over the military through purges, frequent personnel rotations, dishonorable demotions et al. in order to prevent it from becoming the base for a potential rebellion. Within the military, elders like Kim Yong Chun and Kim Jong Gak, as well as newer commanders like Ri Yong Ho, Hyon Yong Chol, and Pyon In Son were purged or even executed.<sup>33</sup> From taking power up until the 7<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2016, Kim Jong-un had replaced his Defense Minister six times (as of 2021, he had done so ten times), and replaced his Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on five occasions.

33 "Executions by firing squad, purges, firings...Five years of Kim Jong-un-style reign of terror," *VCA* (May 3, 2017).

The Head of the General Political Bureau (GPB) of the Korean People's Army was subjected to special treatment. In October 2017, the Party's Organization and Guidance Department launched a large-scale investigation into the GPB, and its then-head Hwang Pyong So and other high-level officials were purged. Furthermore, Kim Jong-un stressed the need for occupational expertise (military professionalism) in the military command, and closed off ways for military commanders to intervene in politics.<sup>34</sup> The Party Bylaws amended at the 8<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2021 stipulate that the military is "the revolutionary armed forces of the Workers' Party of Korea that upholds the leadership of the Party," confirming clearly the Party's superior status and command over the military.<sup>35</sup>

The reign of terror that Kim Jong-un instituted with his purges of the senior ranks of the military and the elites that surrounded him also led to the further politization and excessive growth of the country's public security (regular police) and state security (political police) apparatus. The expansion of the secret police and public security institutions under a dictatorship poses a threat like that of the military, just like the expansion of the military's increased intervention in politics. Thus, in order to induce loyalty in the security services, Kim Jong-un also purged their principal leadership, or sought to foster inter-agency competition. To curtail the further expansion of the Ministry of State Security's (MSS) influence, Kim purged Kim Won Hong (Minister of State Security) and senior officials of the MSS who had led the purge of Jang Song Thaek and the Party's Administrative Department (over which Jang had presided).<sup>36</sup> The MSS's powers were shrunk and Party control strengthened. In the process, the Party's Organization and Guidance Department (OGD), the

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34 Gyu Ho Heo and Gyeong Mo An, "The Role of Military Commanders in the Kim Jong-un Period and Changes in the Character of Military Command: The Rise of Occupational Expertise," *National Defense Policy Research* 35, issue 4 (2019), 70-101.

35 "Decision adopted confirming revisions to the Workers' Party of Korea's Party Bylaws at the 8<sup>th</sup> Party Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea," *Rodong Sinmun* (January 10, 2021).

36 "Kim Jong-un's high-level purges and executions: Minister of State Security Kim Won Hong," *RFA* (February 11, 2019).

General Political Bureau of the Korean People's Army (GPB), and the MSS were played off against one another, and competed to demonstrate their superior loyalty.

Further, to prevent the MSS and the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) from concentrating power in their hands and to stop them from expanding their political influence, the number of policing and legal institutions was expanded and inter-agency rivalry also fermented. The GPB, the MSS, and the MPS and even the OGD found themselves with new competitors. The oversight institutions within the Party and military, which had previously not had any actual power, found their status and duties expanded. For instance, at the 8<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2021, the Party's Central Inspection Committee saw its power greatly expanded, turning it into a power institution charged with presiding over Party financial management activities, and the screening and handling of complaints and petitions related to Party discipline. Moreover, new departments of Party Disciplinary Investigations and Legal Affairs were created under the Party Secretariat. The Department of Disciplinary Investigations is an organization set up to investigate breaches of the Party rules committed by Party organizations and Party members that are against the monolithic rule of Kim Jong-un. The Department of Legal Affairs is believed to supervise the judicial, social security and state security organs just like what the Party's Administrative Department did in the past.<sup>37</sup>

## 2. Restructuring the Party-dominated ruling coalition and taming the elite

As a hereditary successor, Kim Jong-un transitioned from the "Military-first" policy of his father to a "Party-first" policy.<sup>38</sup> The Party

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37 Gyeong-seob Oh and Jin-ha Kim, "Analysis of the Eighth Party Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (3): the Political Sector," *Korean Institute for National Unification Online Series*, CO 21-03 (January 15, 2021), 4, accessed September 5, 2021, <https://www.kinu.or.kr/pyxis-api/1/digital-files/0b0644c6-3b00-4a77-bd aa-09f1c172b724>.

38 Yong-han Pak and Eun-gyeong Kwak, "Assessing the Stability of the Kim Jong-un Regime and the Sustainability of the North Korean System," *Strategic Research* 27, no. 2

emerged as a general power platform for the dictator's clients.<sup>39</sup> The Party's status as the central locus of political power was reconfirmed through the 8<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2021 with the Party bylaws stating: "as the highest form of political organization, the Party's authority shall be thoroughly guaranteed".<sup>40</sup> The Party has thus become the center of power under the Kim Jong-un regime. Personnel and organizational changes, as well as changes to the major state policy that can impact the stability of Kim's powerbase are unveiled through major meetings of the Party and through Party institutions.

The establishment of Kim Jong-un's monolithic system of rule with the Party at its center raised the status of the Party's Organization and Guidance Department (OGD), and the Agitation and Propaganda Department (APD). The OGD in particular demonstrated considerable influence after the purge of Jang Song Thaek and the dissolution of the Party Administrative Department.<sup>41</sup> As Kim Jong-un's power increased, the OGD's authority and status were strengthened further still. Despite the volatility of the power elite, Jo Yong Won's status has continued to rise since 2017, recently being elected to the Presidium of the Politburo and Secretary Responsible for Organizational Matters.<sup>42</sup>

However, Kim Jong-un also expressed guardedness about such developments, and the OGD began to see its power checked. For instance, at the Second Plenary Meeting of the Seventh Central Committee in October 2017, the first deputy director of the OGD, Jo Yon Jun, known as the hidden master manipulator of purge politics including Jang Song Thaek and the real power in the OGD,<sup>43</sup> was de facto demoted. What is more, as noted above, the creation

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(2020): 69.

39 "Kim Jong-un era, 'Party-first' rather than 'Military-first,'" *VOA* (October 8, 2015).

40 *Rodong Sinmun* (January 10, 2021).

41 Gyeong-seob Oh et al., *Composition and Dynamics of the Kim Jong-un Regime Core Elite Group*, 163-164.

42 "North Korean 'key man behind the throne' Jo Yong Won, Organization and Guidance Deputy Director," *VOA* (February 3, 2017).

43 "Jo Yon Jun reportedly suggested to 'make an internal target' to advocate for Jang Song Thaek's purge," *JoongAng Ilbo* (December 12, 2013); "A major planner

of the new departments for Disciplinary Investigations and Legal Affairs led to the partial dispersion of the OGD's previously concentrated authority.

After purging close associates of his father, including Jang Song Thaek, Ri Yong Ho, and Hyon Yong Chol, Kim Jong-un reconstructed the ruling coalition. His father's close associates were potentially dangerous because they could have led elite resistance. In 2017, Kim Jong-un also had his half-brother Kim Jong Nam assassinated – Kim Jong Nam could potentially have become a political rival. Sanctions led to the continued shrinking of the resources needed to maintain the regime, and this meant that Kim Jong-un needed to further reduce the size of the ruling coalition – thus spurring more harsh purges.

The ruling coalition of elites that was created by the Party Conference of early 2012, especially those elites with considerable power, had largely disappeared by the 7<sup>th</sup> Party Congress held in 2016. Five years later, at the 8<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, elites with considerable staying power over the previous decade, including Pak Pong Ju, Choe Hwi, Kim Su Gil, and Choe Bu Il, were ejected from the Politburo, and new elites introduced including Jo Yong Won, Jong Sang Hak, Kim Tu Il, Choe Sang Gon, O Il Jong, Kwon Yong Jin, Kim Jong Gwan, and Ri Yong Gil.<sup>44</sup> At the 7<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, 106 out of 235 members of the Central Committee (including full and candidate members) were reelected, while 129 members were new, i.e., a full 54.9% of members were new.<sup>45</sup> Choe Ryong Hae is a key elite supporting the Kim Jong-un regime. Choe lost his position in 2014 and was sent for "revolutionizing (re-)education." But he returned to power at the 7<sup>th</sup> Party Congress (2016) and was given six positions including a seat on the

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of the North's purges is Jo Yon Yun," *Newsis* (May 15, 2015).

44 Seung-yeol Lee and Yeung Hyeon Lee, "Major Content and Implications of North Korean Workers' Party Eighth Congress," *National Assembly Legislative Survey Office Issues and Points of Discussion*, no. 1797 (February 9, 2021); Kibum Han, "Assessment of North Korea's Eighth Party Congress (III): Changes in Personnel, Revisions to the Party Bylaws et al.," *North Korea Research Institute INKS Opinion* (January 21, 2021).

45 Seung-yeol Lee, "Changes in North Korea's Apparatchiks under Kim Jong-un and Its Policy Implications," *NARS Analysis of Current Issues*, no. 100, 6.

Presidium of the Politburo, a Central Committee Vice Chairmanship, a Vice Chairmanship on the new State Affairs Commission (SAC), and Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly.

However, unlike Choe Ryong Hae, most higher-level cadres from the Kim Jong Il era have been purged. The positions left empty by these purges have been filled by new elites who have demonstrated their loyalty to Kim Jong-un. Thus, the ruling coalition has been reconstituted by elites loyal to Kim Jong-un. Kim's younger sister Kim Yo Jong rose dramatically, while many younger and older cadres who had weak organizational powerbases or had existed on the periphery of the ruling coalition saw their standing rise. This is one of the methods by which personalist regimes strengthen the power of patronage. Newly emergent members of the ruling coalition have only one way to survive and prosper: absolute loyalty to and by further strengthening their ties to the dictator.

Kim Jong-un sought to induce loyalty from the elite through a revolving door of demotions and reappointments, internal exile and reeducation so that no one in the elite could avoid his patrimonial cadre policies. Neither veteran cadres from the Kim Jong Il era nor new elites appointed by Kim Jong-un to top positions were immune.<sup>46</sup> Even when elites could avoid purges and reeducation, they were subjected to frequent Kim Jong-un-style rotation,<sup>47</sup> with unpredictably frequent reorganizations, changes of responsibilities, and frequent moves between the center (Pyongyang) and the provinces being unavoidable. Unlimited loyalty to the absolute power of the patrimonial dictator and competition pushes elites to seek survival at all costs. In the matrix of patrimonial rule, the ruling elite's survival rests on atop the blade of a knife. In particular, in the Kim Jong-un era, the frequency and speed of personnel rotations, and the frequency of demotions and restorations to office of high-ranking cadres is incomparable to that of the Kim Jong Il era.<sup>48</sup> Indeed,

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46 H. E. Chehabi, Juan Linz (eds.), *Sultanistic Regimes* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 3-48.

47 "Possibility of Ri Yong Gil appointment as new Minister of Defense... Kim Jong-un-style revolving door," *VCA* (July 15, 2021).

this has emerged as a feature of elite life under Kim Jong-un. This appears to be the result of economic sanctions, which have reduced financial flows to the regime and made it more difficult for it to buy the loyalty of the elite, pushing it to rely on more coercive and artificial cadre management processes. The ruling elite's number has been reduced in size, and come to resemble what has been termed an "exclusionary patrimonial system."<sup>49</sup>

## IV. Two-sided Policies Targeting the Masses

### 1. Utilizing institutionalized popular control systems

The North Korean regime has ruled the country through the Korean Workers' Party for the past eighty years. During this time, it has institutionalized a system of incentives for its supporters and oppression for its opponents. Kim Il Sung divided the entire North Korean population into three groups and 51 subcategories on the basis of family background and activities in society, the categories being: (1) the core strata (around 28%), (2) the hostile strata (around 45%), and (3) the waiving strata (around 27%).<sup>50</sup> The North Korean people have been subjected to discriminatory treatment on the basis of their origins (Chulsin Songbun). This system of Chulsin Songbun-based (origins-based) discrimination introduced under the Kim Il Sung regime has been maintained up to present, and continues to exercise substantial influence on the lives of the North Korean people.

The Songbun system is the most fundamental set of criteria applied in social life, including in the selection of new Party members, entry into

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48 Ho-ryeong Lee, "Changes and Features of the Power Elite in the Kim Jong-un Era," *KIDA Brief*, no. 2021-Security-4 (July 30, 2021), 5.

49 Byeong-jin Han, "Can North Korea hold on? North Korea's future through variables of state consolidation and market reform," *Korean Political Science Association Journal* 22, issue 2 (2014): 99-118.

50 Geum-sun Lee et al., *North Korean Human Rights White Paper 2009* (Seoul: KINU, 2009), 138-140; Naewaetongsinsa, *North Korean Reality General Materials* (Seoul: Naewaetongsinsa North Korean Problems Research Institute, 1997), 141.



the armed forces, employment in administrative jobs in the Party and Cabinet, promotions *inter alia*. The Party and the state provide incentives to their supporters, the core strata, and inflict discrimination and disadvantage on their opponents, the hostile strata. The core strata are given preferential treatment in social life, including in the selection of Party members, entry into the armed forces, government and Party jobs, and promotions. Party members and those with good social standing (i.e., those serving in the military, workers, etc.) who graduate from university receive privileged treatment in the selection process for new cadres.<sup>51</sup>

Core Songbun members are given more benefits in the selection for the most sought-after job in North Korea - jobs in the diplomatic service. If an applicant's Songbun is poor, they will struggle to gain admission to the training school for diplomats, and also may not be hired as diplomats even if they were to finish training.<sup>52</sup> Those found to have displayed high levels of loyalty to Kim Jong-un and the Party, and to have excellent Songbun receive privileges when screened for promotions in the Party and cabinet. Social backgrounds are also important, with those who have been discharged from the military or worked as regular (blue collar) workers being promoted more quickly than those who have worked in white collar professions (or been university students).<sup>53</sup>

The North Korean regime thoroughly monitors its people in order to curtail the potential spread of political opposition, and opponents are brutally punished. This is a dragnet surveillance system. Lower-level units of the Korean Workers' Party surveils the ideological tendencies of both Party members and non-Party members and report to higher sections of the organization. The organs of surveillance and repression, including the Ministries of State and Public Security, and the Security Command

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51 Jin-wook Choi, *Contemporary North Korean Administration* (Seoul: Ingansarang, 2002), 212-215.

52 Jin-ha Kim *et al.*, *North Korean Foreign Policy: Policy Patterns and Case Analysis of North Korean Nuclear Diplomacy* (Seoul: KINU, 2019), 59-60.

53 *Ibid.*, 62-71.

(within the military), monitor for, uncover and punish anti-system and anti-government activity. They have the authority to tap the phones of anyone from Central Committee cadres down to regional Party cadres, and when necessary, have them followed.<sup>54</sup> For instance, within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), they monitor and control cadres through internal discipline. Party organizations report on all cadres and Party members. Departmental heads within MOFA report their schedule for the day one day prior to the Party committee, and MOFA's Party committee reports on the daily activities of all officials of vice minister or above within MOFA to the Party's Organization and Guidance Department.<sup>55</sup>

Opponents are dealt harshly. Speaking privately, shortly before he was executed, then-Chief of General Staff Marshal Ri Yong Ho was caught on a hidden recording device indirectly criticizing Kim Jong-un, saying, "Did the General (Kim Jong Il) not reform and open the economy because he didn't know that doing so would mean people could live well?"<sup>56</sup> Similarly, eight members of the Unhasu Orchestra were executed, including the orchestra's leader, because bad rumors about Ri Sol Ju, a former member and Kim Jong-un's wife, had spread and become known to the Ministry of State Security.<sup>57</sup> Jang Song Thaek, cadres from the Party's Administrative Department, the 54<sup>th</sup> Department of the military, the 9<sup>th</sup> Department of the Ministry of People's Security, and from the Military Engineers General Bureau of the Ministry of People's Security were executed for conspiring to overthrow the state. A full 15 deputy directors and section chiefs from the Party Administrative Department were put to death by firing squad, while 400 were purged. All those below section head were, along with their families, sent to political prison camps. Around 300 officials from the military's 54<sup>th</sup> Department were also sent to camps.<sup>58</sup>

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54 Jang-yop Hwang, *Sunshine that Has Taken the Side of Darkness Cannot Light Up Darkness* (Seoul: Wolgan Chosun, 2001), 68-73.

55 Yong Ho Thae, *Cipher of the Third Floor Secretariat* (Seoul: Giparang, 2018), 308.

56 *Ibid.*, 309.

57 *Ibid.*, 316.

58 *Ibid.*, 322-333.

The Kim Jong-un regime has also strengthened control and punishment with respect to so-called "anti-socialist activities." Three Party meetings (the December 2019 Party Plenum, the 8<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in January 2021, and the Party Plenum of January 2021) have focused entirely on the issue of their agendas. The slogan advanced to control the masses is "let's defend socialism." And groups that crack down on anti-socialism target the inflow of South Korean culture, commercial activities, and behaviors deemed to violate socialist ideology.<sup>59</sup>

Of late, the regime has sought to strengthen ideological control over the country's youth. The Reactionary Ideological Culture Exclusion Act passed in February 2020, aims to prevent the North Korean people from watching or reading South Korean, the U.S., or Japanese video or books through newly strengthened and draconian punishments. Because this is where North Koreans come into contact with information about capitalist societies and they could potentially become anti-system/anti-government in their outlook. When North Koreans are found to have spread South Korean films, other video, or other media, they could now face indefinite sentences in labor camps, or even the death penalty. While North Koreans who have been found to have directly seen, heard, or stored South Korean films, video, or other media - including books, songs, pictures, and photographs - would now face from five to fifteen years in a labor camp. The U.S. and Japan were both proscribed as "hostile countries," and spreading the media from these countries would result in a minimum sentence of ten years in a labor camp, and potentially even to death sentence.<sup>60</sup>

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59 "Ten Years of Kim Jong-un's Reign, Assessing Governing Strategy, Popular Policies and Popular Control," Cheol Lee, written consultation (September 25, 2021); "Assessment of Kim Jong-un Popular Policies," Kibum Han, written consultation (September 25, 2021).

60 "North Korean-style 'guilt-by association'... Family members of people who bring in and distribute South Korean contents head to political concentration camps," *Daily NK* (September 16, 2021), accessed September 20, 2021, [https://www.dailynk.com/북한관\\_연좌제\\_남\\_콘텐츠\\_유입\\_유포자\\_가족\\_정치](https://www.dailynk.com/북한관_연좌제_남_콘텐츠_유입_유포자_가족_정치).

The Kim Jong-un regime has organized and operated a Combined Command for Anti-Socialist Activities that seeks to control the ideological lives of the country's youth. At the same time, it is strengthening control over the inflow and the spread of external information.<sup>61</sup> The Supreme People's Assembly's (SPA) Standing Committee also passed the Youth Education Guarantee Act at its fifth session of the 14<sup>th</sup> SPA. The act establishes an ideological control framework that targets the youth, and seeks to block their exposure to foreign capitalist culture and media.<sup>62</sup> As external sources of information have flowed into North Korean society, ideological control of the country's young has become a major issue facing the regime.

## 2. Establishing Kim Jong-un's authority and legitimacy

The Kim Jong-un regime has put in place policies to firmly establish Kim Jong-un's authority and legitimacy. This is because the masses must acknowledge his authority and legitimacy in order to voluntarily support him. First of all, his authority and legitimacy has been located in his symbolic blood ties to the "Paekdu Bloodline," i.e. Kim's membership of the same family as Kim Jong Il and Kim Il Sung. The Kim Jong-un regime utilized the "succession by bloodline" motif in the early stages of his rule in order to cement his authority and legitimacy. A text mining analysis of official documents released in Kim Jong-un's name from 2012 onward indicates that between 2012 and 2015, frequent use was made of "Kim Jong Il Patriotism" and "dying instructions." Further, Term Frequency-Inverse Document Frequency (TF-IDF) analysis, which is used to determine the relative importance of particular words in particular documents, indicated that "parent", "Kim Jong Il", "hero", and "Paekdu" were highly important relatively.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> "Ten Years of Kim Jong-un's Reign, Popular Policies and Popular Control," Il-gi Kim, written consultation (September 25, 2021).

<sup>63</sup> Gyeong-seob Oh et al., *The Kim Jong-un Regime's Ruling Discourse and Sectoral Policy Change: Text-mining Analysis of Remarks and Speeches* (Seoul: KINU, 2020), 51-58.

In his 2012 New Year's Address, Kim Jong-un said that the succession of the Juche revolution's great work was important for the Party and the revolution, but that this was a time for responsibility, and emphasized the call to realize the dying instructions of Kim Jong Il. The address also set out the slogan "Respected and Beloved Kim Jong-un is [no different to] Great Comrade Kim Jong Il." To the people, realizing the dying instructions meant uniting single-heartedly around Kim Jong-un as a successor and protecting him with their lives.<sup>64</sup> Further, at the expanded meeting of the Central Committee's Politburo on February 19, 2015, realizing the dying instructions of Kim Jong Il was prescribed as being the primary task that must be "unconditionally accomplished."<sup>65</sup> Kim Jong-un intentionally sought to capitalize on the authority and legitimacy of his grandfather Kim Il Sung, who has been deified in North Korea, through the creation of symbols that associate him with Kim Il Sung and thus confer authority and legitimacy. Kim Jong-un created an image of himself as resembling Kim Il Sung, he also sought to stimulate nostalgia for his grandfather amongst the North Korean people and induce their support. Kim Jong-un has sought to imitate his grandfather's behaviors, appearance and manner of dress: he claps like his grandfather, apparently walks like him (or at least imitates his gait), sports a similar potbelly, has worn a similar coat, had his hair cut in a similar way, and has a double-chin that is also rather similar.<sup>66</sup>

Second, Kim Jong-un has sought to create the image of a "people's leader."

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64 "Let's accept the dying instructions of Great Comrade Kim Jong Il and turn 2012 into a year of glorious restoration, shining with laudable victories," *Rodong Sinmun* (January 1, 2012); "Let's press toward building a prosperous and strong fatherland, realizing Kim Jong Il Patriotism – Remarks to Responsible Officials of the Central Committee of the Korean Workers' Party," *Rodong Sinmun* (August 3, 2012).

65 "A Korean Workers' Party Central Committee Politburo Expanded Meeting was held under the leadership of the Respected and Beloved Comrade First Secretary of the Korean Workers' Party Kim Jong-un," *Rodong Sinmun* (February 19, 2015).

66 "To Sell a New Leader, North Korea Finds a Mirror Is Handy," *The New York Times*, Feb. 1, 2012, accessed June 8, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/02/world/asia/packaging-of-kim-jong-un-in-north-korea.html>.

Before being designated as his father's successor in December 2008, Kim Jong-un was unknown to the North Korean people. To receive popular support, Kim needed to foster the appearance of a leader who had the people's interest at heart. Immediately after acceding to power, Kim Jong-un began pursuing construction projects in the capital, including of housing, rest and relaxation, and entertainment facilities, and he began making frequent visits to the construction sites to monitor progress.<sup>67</sup> Further, Kim Jong-un actively sought out members of the public. For instance, the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported on September 5, 2012, that Kim Jong-un and Ri Sol Ju (his wife) visited the home of a newly-wed couple, a teacher from Pyongyang Machinery University and a worker, who had moved into an apartment on Changjon Street, in the Mansudae area of Pyongyang. North Korea's ruler and his wife were depicted in the report as showing concern for the welfare of these newlyweds.<sup>68</sup>

Third, the Kim Jong-un regime sought to induce voluntary popular support through ideological education. The more the people spontaneously supported the regime, the higher the level of their loyalty, and the less likely they were to renege on their support. Ideological education was divided into two kinds, education that targeted the masses, and education targeting Party members and cadres. Ideological education of the masses demanded loyalty toward the supreme leader. As Kim Jong-un emphasized in his conclusion speech to the Sixth Congress of Korean Workers' Party Cell Secretaries, the effective medicine to ensure the people are educated in a revolutionary fashion are the followings: (1) education on revolutionary tradition, (2) loyalty education, (3) education on patriotism, (4) anti-imperialist class education, and (5) moral education.<sup>69</sup> These five forms of education aim to firmly establish the loyalty of the people toward their leader.

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67 Gyeong-seob Oh et al., *The Kim Jong-un Regime's Ruling Discourse and Sectoral Policy Change*, 73-74.

68 "North's Mr. and Mrs. Kim Jong-un, visit family house in Pyongyang," *Yonhap News* (September 5, 2012), accessed August 14, 2020, <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20120905197000014>.

69 "Let's yet more aggressively engage in ideological work to cultivate people strong in ideology and hot bloodedly loyal," *Rodong Sinmun* (June 16, 2021).

In addition, the Kim Jong-un regime made efforts to ensure that the Party did not lose the support of the masses. This required that cadres and Party members made sure that the people loved the Party. Party members were to practice the "idea of working for the people as if they were the heavens," and pursue Party work that was pro-people and realistic. What is more, cadres and Party members were pushed to struggle against corruption. The first practices that the Party was to curtail and struggle against were wielding power inappropriately, bureaucratism, and corruption, with Party organizations told to be uncompromising in struggles even against small issues.<sup>70</sup> This was designed to stop the people from becoming discontented with the Party.

### 3. People-centered policy

The Kim Jong-un regime has pursued what it terms "people-centered" policies since Kim acceded to the apex of power in the late 2011. The goal of these policies was to create a popular wellspring of support for the new leader. From 2012 up to January 2020, the word "people" was the most often used in Kim Jong-un's publicly released remarks and speeches about politics.<sup>71</sup> The Korean Workers' Party used the slogan "Everything for the people, and everything based upon the popular masses." Cadres and Party members were told they must devote themselves completely to attain the love of the masses and to serve the people.<sup>72</sup>

Over the last decade, the Kim Jong-un regime has repeatedly utilized a "people-centered" discourse in major speeches given by Kim.<sup>73</sup> At the April

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70 Gyeong-seob Oh and Jin-ha Kim, "Analysis of the Eighth Party Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (3): the Political Sector."

71 Oh Gyeong-seob et al., *The Kim Jong-un Regime's Ruling Discourse and Sectoral Policy Change*, 53

72 "Supreme Commander Kim Jong-un's speech to our Party, state and military at parade to commemorate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Korean Workers' Party foundation and Pyongyang mass demonstration," *Rodong Sinmun* (October 11, 2015); "Let's bring forward final victory through revolutionary ideological assault – Respected and Beloved Comrade Kim Jong-un's speech to the Korean Workers' Party's Eighth Ideological Worker Congress," *Rodong Sinmun* (February 26, 2014); "New Year's Address," *Rodong Sinmun* (January 1, 2013).

15, 2012 parade (organized to commemorate the centennial of Kim Il Sung's birth), Kim Jong-un declared, "it is the firm determination of our Party that the people shall never again be made to tighten their belts and that they shall enjoy socialist prosperity to their heart's content."<sup>74</sup> While in his speech at the October 10, 2015 parade organized to celebrate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Party's foundation, Kim said, "the authentic image of Korea is of the Party revering the people like the heavens, thinking of them as its teacher, the people boundlessly trusting the Party as its mother and following it with our single-hearted unity, and this is the cornerstone of the entire Military First Revolution."<sup>75</sup>

At the 7th Party Congress in May 2016, Kim Jong-un declared the Party's politics to be "the popular masses first politics." The revised Party bylaws similarly stipulated that "popular masses first politics" were the fundamental political style of the Party, determining whether the Party would survive or perish, and whether socialism would succeed or fail. The Party and the state must invest everything, sparing nothing, to improve the livelihoods of the people. Cadres and Party members were required to hold in their hearts the importance of the people, to respect and love them, and see the popular masses as their masters, becoming loyal servants of the people ready to devote themselves entirely to serving the popular masses.<sup>76</sup>

The Kim Jong-un regime believed that it needed to improve living

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73 "Assessment of Kim Jong-un Popular Policies," Kibum Han, written consultation (September 25, 2021). For an analysis of the major political discourse regarding people-centered policies in the North from 2012-2021, we referred to Kibum Han's written consultation.

74 "Supreme Commander Kim Jong-un's speech to our Party and people at the parade to commemorate the centennial of Great Leader Generalissimo Kim Il Sung's birth," *Rodong Sinmun* (April 16, 2012).

75 "Supreme Commander Kim Jong-un's speech to our Party, state and military at parade to commemorate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Korean Workers' Party foundation and Pyongyang mass demonstration," *Rodong Sinmun* (October 11, 2015).

76 "General Summary Report on the Central Committee's Work to the Seventh Congress of the Korean Workers' Party," *Rodong Sinmun* (May 8, 2016).



standards in order to attain the support of the people. Assertions of "people first" would not forestall growing popular discontent without some degree of improvement. In his speeches and remarks, Kim Jong-un repeatedly called the food problem and its resolution as core tasks for the improvement of popular living standards.<sup>77</sup> At the February 18, 2015 expanded politburo session, Kim said, "providing an abundant and happy life to the people is the dying instruction above all else and lifelong wish of the General (Kim Jong Il)··· Among the dying instructions of the Great Leader (Kim Il Sung) and the General (Kim Jong Il), the instructions related to the people's food issue, food issue, and clothing issue must be implemented first."<sup>78</sup> In his report to the 7th Party Congress in May 2016, Kim said, "during the five-year economic strategy period, the food issue must be resolved and the people's food supply must be normalized."<sup>79</sup>

However, as UN Security Council sanctions targeting the North have persisted, and the border has been closed due to COVID-19, the regime has failed to resolve the food situation. Kim Jong-un apologized for the failure to overcome economic difficulties. In his New Year's Address in 2017, Kim said, "my heart is heavy with concerns for how to serve the people better··· At all times, I have always been of this mind, and with regret and guilt that I have not lived up to this with my abilities I spent the previous year, and this year I will work yet harder and with my whole heart."<sup>80</sup> At the parade convoked on October 10, 2020 to celebrate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Party foundation, Kim gave a speech in which he said, "with the trust of all people, I have led this country, but my efforts and devotion have not been enough to help the people overcome

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77 "Let's accept the dying instructions of Great Comrade Kim Jong Il and turn 2012 into a year of glorious restoration, shining with laudable victories," *Rodong Sinmun* (January 1, 2012).

78 "A Korean Workers' Party Central Committee Politburo Expanded Meeting was held under the leadership of the Respected and Beloved Comrade First Secretary of the Korean Workers' Party Kim Jong-un," *Rodong Sinmun* (February 19, 2015)

79 "On the decision at the Seventh Korean Workers' Party Congress made regarding the General Summary Report on the Central Committee's Work to the Seventh Congress of the Korean Workers' Party on May 8, Juche 105 (2016)," *Rodong Sinmun* (May 9, 2016).

80 "New Year's address," *Rodong Sinmun* (January 1, 2017).

the difficulties with their lives... I have received only the trust of our people, who are like the heavens and the seas, and I am so sorry that I have not been able to properly repay them."<sup>81</sup>

At the 8<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in January 2021, Kim Jong-un admitted that the Five-Year Economic Development Strategy set forth at the 7<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2016 had been a failure. Kim said that "the difficulties are the worst of the worst that have ever been faced, being a massive impediment to our revolution's progress... the Five-Year Economic Development Strategy was finished last year, but the targets for almost every sector were fall short," thus recognizing officially the failure of economic policy.<sup>82</sup> This policy failure recognition was that of a leader seeking to directly admit problems to the people, and in doing so cultivate the image of a leader seeking their forgiveness and patience.

In 2021, the aforementioned congress was convoked to pursue economic development and improvements in popular living standards, with three plenary sessions of the Central Committee also subsequently being convoked for such a purpose. The Consultative Meeting of the Central Committee and Responsible Provincial Party Cadres held on June 7, 2021 was also convoked to discuss economic work and practical policies to stabilize the living standards of the people. However, the Kim Jong-un regime has proved unable to set out fundamental solutions to resolve the economic problems the country faces and to improve the lives of the people.

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81 "Kim Jong-un, breaks down during 8,000 syllable speech, beloved southern compatriots on the path to delicious restaurants," *Joongang Ilbo* (October 10, 2020), accessed June 10, 2021, <https://news.joins.com/article/23890905>.

82 "Speech to open the Eighth Congress of the Korean Workers' Party," *Rodong Sinmun* (January 6, 2021).

## V. Conclusions

This article has analyzed how Kim Jong-un regime has sought to forge a monolithic system of rule and stabilize the power of Kim Jong-un following his rise to the apex of power through elite management and popular policies. The new regime's success in creating a stable base of power for Kim Jong-un is a consequence of the policies that it has put in place. Elite policies focused on reconstructing the ruling coalition and inducing elite loyalty. Kim Jong-un purged the members of the guardianship system that his father had put in place who he did not trust. And he purged some 260 elite members of the Party, government and military between 2012 and 2016. Kim Jong-un appointed people whom had proven themselves loyal to him to high office, restructuring the ruling coalition, and creating a new basis of support for his regime that stabilized his powerbase.

What is more, Kim Jong-un restored the Korean Workers' Party to its place as the center of rule in the country. The military's influence, having expanded through Military First Politics under Kim Jong Il, saw its power curtailed. Gaining control over the military was a major task facing the Kim Jong-un regime in stabilizing its powerbase. This was because the military was both the most important base of support and the biggest potential threat to the regime. Hence, in order to induce the loyalty of the military elite, Kim Jong-un purged major military elites like Chief of General Staff Ri Yong Ho, and Minister of People's Armed Forces Hyon Yong Chol, while also frequently rotating office holders in high level military positions. Through purges and churn, the threat that the military potentially posed Kim Jong-un was substantially diminished.

From the point of view of stabilization, the regime's popular policies were also comparatively successful. Over the last decade, the Kim Jong-un regime has pursued a two-sided set of policies targeting the North Korean populace. It has provided incentives to supporters, and repression and/or punishment to opponents. The Kim Jong-un regime has articulated "people-centered" and "popular masses first" policies aimed at supporters, while those who are categorized as "hostile strata" or those hostile to the government are subject

to surveillance and repression. In the course of establishing the Korean Workers' Party as the basis of his nascent regime, Kim utilized existing systems of social control to target supporters with incentives and opponents with repression.

Further, the Kim Jong-un regime also put in place policies to firmly establish Kim Jong-un's authority and legitimacy. The new regime consciously sought to present Kim Jong-un as a successor to his grandfather through imitation, presenting him as a pro-people leader, and utilized the idea of the "Paekdu bloodline" of the Kim family. What is more, the regime pursued a people-oriented policy. Cadres and Party members were told to prize, revere and love the popular masses, consider them to be their masters, and to become their loyal servants. This "popular masses first" ideology was codified in the Party Bylaws at the 7<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2016. The Kim Jong-un regime said it would resolve the country's food problems in order to gain the people's support. However, as sanctions, and the COVID-19 pandemic-induced border closures have persisted, the economic crisis has deepened, and food problems have remained unresolved.

The Kim Jong-un regime's inability to resolve the food problem has presented a significant challenge. Economic crisis will inflame elite discontent and popular resentment. The regime's capacity to maintain the support of the elite and the masses will hinge on its ability to resolve the economic crisis. Further, success in the ideological control of the youth will be important in determining whether they support the regime. This is because young people who are exposed to information about the outside capitalist world could voice discontent with the North Korean system and the Kim Jong-un regime, and this could destabilize this system.

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