

Online Series

2023. 09. 04. | CO 23-25

Searching for Scapegoats in the Face of Crisis and Signs of a “New Military-first Policy”

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What Chairman Kim’s Rage Means

On August 21, Chairman Kim Jong-un of North Korea raged at the collapse of an embankment and flood damage during his inspection over the tide land in Ansok, South Pyongan Province. Chairman Kim said the situation was not a disaster caused by natural forces but “a man-made disaster caused by idlers who neglected their duties,” and defined relevant officials as “immature employees who do not understand how to keep in tune with the Party Center.” What Chairman Kim really meant is that since the Party Center is himself, those officials ignored the appeals of North Korea’s supreme leader. “I won’t forgive those who neglected their duties,” Chairman Kim said. He even ordered the Organization and Guidance Department, the Discipline and Investigation Department, the State Inspection Commission, and the Central Public Prosecutors Office to “identify and censure responsible organizations and officials, and impose harsh punishment under the party policies and laws.” The order called for the launch of a joint investigation by all top level inspection and investigation authorities in North Korea.

This type of sanctions suggests a legal penalty and a punishment by the Party at the severest level, including a capital punishment. A learning material released in June 2013, titled “*All Workers... Should Grow into Leading Officials with Sincerity*,” expressed former Korean People’s Army Chief of General Staff Ri Yong Ho, who is known to have been executed, as “the anti-Party, anti-revolutionary cell,” defining him as “a person remedied under the party

policies and laws.” This expression was also applied to former West Sea Admiral Jeon Jong-gab and former Vice Minister of People's Armed Forces Kim Chol, both of whom are known to have been executed as well.

Chairman Kim's rage was targeted at Premier Kim Tok Hun and the Cabinet. “The Cabinet does not have the right system to carry out programs and has employed incompetent workers,” Chairman Kim said. “The administrative and economic disciplines of the Kim Tok Hun cabinet have been considerably disordered and, as a result, idlers have spoiled national economic programs with their irresponsible work attitude.” According to Chairman Kim, it is the Cabinet that ruined the North Korean economy. Chairman Kim lambasted the premier in particular, calling his name as much as five times and pointing out his “lackluster work attitude and jaundiced views.” This is a complete departure from when Chairman Kim promoted him to the position of premier and defined the Cabinet as the control tower to manage economic affairs.

Premier Kim and the Cabinet, a Scapegoat for Kim's Regime

Since taking office in August 2020, Premier Kim has actively engaged in many economic projects under the auspices of Chairman Kim. North Korea's media used to focus on Premier Kim's heightened status as he was often seen following Chairman Kim. However, the fates of Premier Kim and the Cabinet seem to have been determined from the beginning. A recovery of the North Korean economy was hard to achieve due to structural factors: the constraints of sanctions on North Korea, the side effects of prolonged pandemic border closures, and failures of many policies, including the introduction of a new agricultural production system. A more profound problem was that the Cabinet had no substantive power, as the Worker's Party has a control over North Korea. Chairman Kim harshly criticized privilege and entitlement enjoyed by authorities in North Korea. However, it is almost impossible for the Cabinet with little power to curb the privileges exercised by these institutions: the Cabinet does not have the ability to control such organizations as the Workers' Party of Korea Office No. 39 (an organization responsible for earning income in foreign currencies), the Ministry of State Security, the Ministry of Social Security, the Ministry of National Defense, the General Political Bureau, and the Second Economic Committee, which represents the military economy.

The powerless Cabinet was mandated to fulfill unachievable economic recovery, and this may be part of Chairman Kim's predetermined strategy to shift the blame onto the scapegoated institution. While Premier Kim had no choice but to remain committed to economic projects with no hope of success, Chairman Kim was focused on achieving tangible results in defense

projects, such as launching missiles and developing new weapons systems. The photos of Chairman Kim ordering to disinfect flooded farmlands in Anbyon or standing thigh deep in the tide land in Ansok serve as staged scenes to emphasize Chairman Kim's devotion to national defense advancement, which is in stark contrast to the Cabinet's incompetence.

The reason Kim Jong-un has brought this contrast into relief has something to with a crisis situation in North Korea. In July 2023, the Bank of Korea estimated North Korea's nominal gross national income in 2022 at KRW 36.7 trillion, which accounted for a meager 1.7% of South Korea's GNI. The North Korean economy has continued to shrink for three years in a row after recording -3.5% in 2017, -4.1% in 2018, and -4.5% in 2020. This represents North Korea's worst-ever economic crisis since the Arduous March in the 1990s. In August 2023, the National Intelligence Service (NIS) in South Korea reported to the National Assembly that the number of deaths due to starvation in North Korea between January and July 2023 had been more than as twice as large as the average of the past five years, and a non-standing task force had been established under provincial party institutions to ferret out malcontent elements as complaints and joint protests against Chairman Kim's family and policies by the Workers' Party grew. The NIS also reported that North Korea had declared a "war on crime" in early 2013, which has little to show for, and that the number of North Koreans fleeing to South Korea had been on the rise.

In the 1990s, approximately 25,000 North Koreans were executed or sent to concentration camps in a purge, a case known as the Deepening Group Incident. The then Secretary of Agriculture So Kwan-hee was accused as a spy by the Kim Jong-il regime, and the case was turned into a massive bloody purge that targeted some elites and their families. In fact, the incident was a total fabrication, in which North Korea even used the Korean War to find scapegoats and enforce a rule of terror, as part of overcoming a economic crisis of the Arduous March, which had shaken to the core of its system.

At the Conference of Party Cell Secretaries held in April 2021, Chairman Kim said he was determined to go through with "a more severe Arduous March." Since then, the North Korean economy has been only aggravating. This suggests that Chairman Kim's strong criticism of Premier Kim and the Cabinet is part of his strategy to find a breakthrough amid the worst-ever crisis since his inauguration by searching for scapegoats and enforcing a rule of terror. In comparison to previous episodes of purge, what Chairman Kim said in Ansok hints at the beginning of another bloody purge of a large scale. On August 25, the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported on a congratulatory letter by Premier Kim, which was sent to Prime Minister of Thailand. However, it was only a two-sentence article, which might be used as

a way to distract people from an intensive investigation, which has just begun. Given all these, it is fair to say that Premier Kim and the Cabinet are on the brink of a yet another massive bloody purge.

The Rise of the Korean People’s Army and Signs of a “New Military–first Policy”

Before Chairman Kim shifted the center of gravity from the military to the Party by abolishing the National Defense Commission, which had been the main control tower of the military–first policy under Kim Jong–il regime. In nature, the military–first policy was a North Korean version of reign rooted in martial law, where the Kim Jong–il regime relied on to run its system in the face of the Arduous March in the 1990s. North Korea declared August 25, 1960, when Kim Jong–il, together with Kim Il–sung, visited the 105th Guards Seoul Ryu Kyong–su Armored Division for the first time, as the Day of Songun (military–first), but the term, Songun, first appeared in a *Rodong Sinmun* article on December 12, 1997 at the height of the Arduous March. During the era of military–first policy, the military took precedence over the Party when it comes to protecting the regime and the North Korean system.

Even after Kim Jong–un took office and shifted the emphasis away from the military to the Party, the Korean People’s Army (KPA) played a leading role in carrying out large–scale construction projects such as the Masikryong Ski Resort, the Wonsan–Kalma Coastal Tourism Area, and 50,000 homes in Pyongyang. The KPA also led restoration projects after natural disasters, including floods. Moreover, when the regime admitted the spread of COVID–19 within the country and introduced a nationwide emergency prevention system, the KPA was actively engaged in the fight against the pandemic, which was highly praised by Chairman Kim. After commissioning the Cabinet to deal with economic affairs, Chairman Kim has focused on military events. The most frequent public activities by Kim Jong–un took place in the military sector for the first half of 2023, 13 times in total, and that number surpasses those of the three previous years from 2020 through 2022, which was about 6 to 12 each year.

The fact that Chairman Kim praised the military while criticizing Premier Kim and the Cabinet deserves special attention. On August 18, North Korea’s media reported on Chairman Kim speaking highly of the KPA for its restoration work in Anbyon, “(The KPA) created a miracle of restoring (the flooded farmlands) in a short period of time,” and “Once again, the revolutionary army proved its staunch loyalty and a spirit of fighting to the fullest.” Chairman Kim stressed the importance of the military, when inspecting the collapsed embankment in Ansok, saying “even the military was mobilized to recover the affected area.” On August 23,

soon after Chairman Kim blasted Premier Kim and the Cabinet, *Rodong Sinmun* released an article, praising the militar and saying high-ranking party officials must model themselves after the KPA commanders. It went on to say that the KPA has “undefeated ranks which guarantee complete success, always carrying out party policies.” On August 25, the newspaper lambasted high-ranking party officials for their work attitude and recommended them to learn “the KPA soldiers’ spirit of fighting, who are unwaveringly obedient and absolutely loyal to the supreme commander.”

Despite two failed attempts to launch a spy satellite into orbit on May 31 and August 24, 2023, North Korea said it would make the third attempt in October. The South Korean military said the North Korean satellite had “no military utility” based on its analysis of the remains of the launch vehicle obtained in June. The Kim Jong-un regime prioritizes strengthening defense capabilities over achieving economic recovery, and placed the KPA at the forefront in time of crisis. With little chance of North Korea achieving economic recovery, the presence of the military within North Korea will only grow as the crisis facing the regime amplifies. In Ansok, Chairman Kim said the problems involving Premier Kim and the Cabinet are largely attributable to the Party Central Committee, as it is in charge of guiding North Korea through party policies. Even the Workers’ Party was regarded as one of the institutions responsible for the problems. The KPA was the only institution that not only avoided Kim’s criticism but was promoted as an exemplary model. This shows a possibility of the Kim Jong-un regime introducing a “new military-first policy.”

Against this backdrop, the possibility of a large-scale bloody purge shouldn’t be ruled out, and whether it will be materialized depends on the upcoming results of the investigation over Premier Kim and the Cabinet. Given such level of criticism, there could be a second round of Deepening Group Incident. Nevertheless, North Korea’s elites and ordinary people have been well aware of the powerlessness of Premier Kim and the Cabinet from the beginning and the fact that the Incident was fabricated. It is, therefore, questionable whether the purge searching for scapegoats would achieve North Korea’s goals of increasing the durability of the regime and the cohesion of North Korean systems. The recent spotlight on the KPA and signs of a new military-first policy under the rule of Kim Jong-un have something to do with the crisis structure in North Korea: they all add up to a reality that the Cabinet and other governing apparatus are not functioning well. ©KINU 2023

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