

Online Series

2023. 09. 06. | CO 23-27

The Adoption of the Law on Tourism: Is It a Signal of North Korean Openness?

Na, Yongwoo

(Research Fellow, Human Rights Research Division)

On August 30, North Korea held the 27th plenary meeting of the 14th term of the Standing Committee of the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) and adopted a law on tourism. According to the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), "the new law on tourism details the issues of revitalizing domestic tourism and expanding international tourism simultaneously, ensuring the convenience of tourists, and proactively protecting the ecological environment." On August 27, North Korea's National Emergency Quarantine Command announced that it would officially authorize the return of North Koreans living abroad for the first time in three years and seven months after completely denying their entry. This indicates that the reopening of North Korea's borders, which began with the partial resumption of trade with China as well as exchanges of foreign diplomats and athlete delegations, is truly underway. The law on tourism is understood to be a preliminary measure in preparation for the revitalization of domestic and international tourism following the complete reopening of North Korea's borders.

Until now, laws related to tourism and openness only existed in the form of special laws, such as the law on the Mt. Kumgang special zone for international tourism adopted in 2011 and other laws regarding special economic zones. The adoption of the new law is significant as it was institutionalized as general law for the first time. In other words, the law on tourism is not restricted to a specific region but applicable to every region in North Korea.

Then, what is the reason that North Korea adopted the law on tourism at a time when tension on the Korean Peninsula is increasing due to North Korea's military provocations? First, it appears to have been influenced by economic concerns. Amidst strong sanctions on North Korea enforced by the international community, North Korea's economy has vastly deteriorated

to the extent that people have died of starvation as a result of stringent measures to close its borders in response to COVID-19. The Bank of Korea announced this past July that North Korea's economic growth rate in 2022 had decreased by 0.2% compared to the previous year. Moreover, North Korea has recorded negative economic growth three years in a row since 2020. Tourism is a relatively cost-effective industry in North Korea where lack of technology and infrastructure is evident. Furthermore, tourism is vital for elevating Kim Jong-un's accomplishments since it is the industry that he has strategically developed since he took power. For example, the Kim Jong-un regime has contributed considerable resources and manpower to the tourism industry, which include the constructions of the Wonsan-Kalma coastal tourist zone, the Yangdok hot spring cultural recreation center, and the Masikryong ski resort. According to Reuters, approximately 350 thousand Chinese tourists visited North Korea in 2018 and North Korea is estimated to have earned a profit of about 175 million dollars.¹⁾ This means that the tourism industry is a vital economic driver for North Korea. Second, there is also a political aspect. According to the report by KCNA, the law on tourism will also revitalize domestic tourism. North Korea may be hoping that what they call "free tourism" will partially alleviate dissatisfaction among the public, which was caused by social controls, including restrictions on travel across regions due to COVID-19, and lead to increased stability of its system. Lastly, the law on tourism has also external aspect. Kim Jong-un is trying to cultivate an image of North Korea as a normal state of the international community. In this context, using the phrase "proactively protecting the ecological environment" can be interpreted as an attempt to demonstrate to the international community that North Korea is committed to participating in efforts to achieve carbon neutrality at a global level.

But even though the law on tourism has been adopted, it will be difficult for the North Korean regime to achieve its intended economic effects because sanctions on North Korea will continue to be enforced. Moreover, given that North Korean residents cannot enjoy freedom of movement due to strong social control by the regime, it is next to impossible for them to enjoy the benefits of the law on tourism that has just been adopted. This means the law on tourism is likely to increase social unrest since only privileged citizens are poised to have access to the benefits of it. In addition, although North Korea needs a large number of foreign tourists to earn foreign currency, this can create a more concerning situation for the regime. Complete reopening of the border and increased tourism will result in mutual interactions between North Koreans and foreign tourists at major North Korean tourist locations. This implies that the likelihood

¹⁾ Hyonhee Shin, "North Korea to launch medical tourism, targeting visitors from China," *Reuters*, December 6, 2019, <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-tourism-idUSKBN1YA0WA>> (Accessed September 6, 2023).

of North Koreans being exposed to outside information and foreign culture may increase. North Korea has already prepared institutional measures to prevent this worrying situation. Strong criminal punishment for an act of importing and spreading outside information and foreign culture to North Korea has been stipulated by enacting a series of laws, including Public Report Act (2019), Reactionary Ideology and Culture Rejection Act (2020), Youth Education Guarantee Law (2021), and the Pyongyang Cultural Language Protection Law (2023). Through these laws and regulations, North Korea strictly controls over access to outside information so that its people will continue to stay away from it.

The overall development in North Korea, then, poses the following question: can we really say that the adoption of the law on tourism signals a higher level of external openness? Given sanctions on the authoritarian regime, foreign tourists that North Korea can expect to attract will mostly be from friendly countries such as China and Russia, as well as North Koreans living overseas or diasporas. Based on enhanced political and military cooperation with China and Russia, North Korea is likely to pursue economic and tourism cooperation with these traditional allies. Moreover, taking into account the fact that North Koreans overseas were included as eligible people for tourism in the law on the Mt. Kumgang special zone for international tourism adopted in 2011, it can be anticipated that North Koreans overseas will also be included as eligible in the newly adopted law. If so, there is a need for the international community to devise measures to send information about the outside world to North Korean society through Chinese, Russian, and North Korean overseas tourists.

As mentioned as a key component of the law on tourism, North Korea has emphasized harmony with nature and the ecological environment when developing tourist locations. Kim Jong-un ordered the unilateral dismantlement of South Korean-built facilities at Mt. Kumgang in 2019, and North Korea's Premier Kim Tok-hun stated that facilities "will be built again on our terms so that it will be **in harmony with the natural beauty** of Mt. Kumgang." Judging from his remarks, rather than caring about its ecological environment, North Korea appears to be intent on having the upper hand in joint tourism projects with foreign partners, claiming they are committed to protecting the ecological environment. Since North Korea's efforts toward openness are always designed restrictively, it will be difficult for the country to bring about the intended effects from the newly adopted law.

©KINU 2023

※ The views expressed in this paper are entirely those of the author and are not to be construed as representing those of the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU).