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North Korea's Political System*

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Introduction

A year has passed since the birth of the Kim Jong-un regime in North Korea following the sudden death of General Secretary Kim Jong-il in December 2011. During the early days of the regime, many observers commented that all would not be smooth sailing for the new regime, citing the lack of power and previous experience of the youthful Kim Jong-un as a primary cause of concern. However, on the surface at least, it now appears that Kim Jong-un is now in full control of his powers as the “Guiding Leader” and that the political situation is calm. The crucial issue is whether the present situation is stable and sustainable. To consider this issue properly, it is important to understand the following series of questions. What is the current political structure in North Korea? Is the political structure the same as that which existed under the Kim Jong-il regime, or have significant changes occurred? What political dynamics are at play within this structure?

Answering these questions with any degree of accuracy is not an easy task. With these questions in mind, the purpose of this paper is to examine North Korea's political system¹ by describing its prototype and providing an overview of the process of change that took place under the Kim Jong-il regime, and to arrive at some conjectures on how the situation may unfold under the Kim Jong-un regime.

I. Prototype

North Korea's political system since the 1980s can be best described in terms of the concept of “*Suryong* (leader) system.” In the present context, this refers to a “system whose purpose is to perpetuate the guidance of the leader through hereditary succession.”² The salient feature of the North Korean system of *Suryong* is that, while it traces its roots to the socialist dictatorship of Leninism, it is primarily based on North Korea's own *juche* ideology, and the “*Suryong*” has replaced the “party” as the nucleus of political leadership. Its internalized purpose is to perpetuate its rule through an even more comprehensive and exhaustive regimentation of the population. The following section reviews the respective roles of the *Suryong* and the party and the basic methods used to govern the population, and presents an overview of “successor to *Suryong*” as the key to the perpetuation of rule.

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1. Functions of *Suryong* and Party

One of the central features of Leninism is its positioning of the “vanguard party” as the actual agency of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Opponents criticized this line of thought saying that it opened the way to personal dictatorship, and argued that the transfer of power to the party would be followed by the transfer of power to the party’s central committee and ultimately to a small group of leaders. The system of *Suryong* may be said to have come into existence in a way that justifies and lends credence to the point raised by this criticism. According to the fundamental principle of human beings that lies at the core of the *juche* ideology, individual human beings are identified as “social beings endowed with the qualities of independence and creativity.” However, insofar as individuals are “social beings,” it is only through appropriate social action that they can express the faculties of “independence” and “creativity.” According to this ideology, this process requires unconditional and absolute obedience to the “guidance” of the *Suryong* as the supreme leader of society. In this context, the party was assigned the function and position of a “belt that conveys the guidance of the Leader to the people.” Finally, the ideology takes on the flavor of religious dogma by positing under the theory of “socio-political organism”³ that the individual can transcend the limits of physical life and attain eternal socio-political life through obedience to the guidance of the Leader.⁴

Defining the position and significance of the *Suryong* in this manner reduces the relative importance of the party. However, it is clearly impossible for all the activities of the nation and society to be at all times controlled and governed through the personal power of the Leader. Hence, the party is invested with authorities that are buttressed by the absolute authority of the *Suryong*. Thus, the real authority with which the North Korean Workers’ Party is endowed is by no means inferior to the authority that was once exercised by the ruling parties of any other socialist countries.

The “real functions” performed by the ruling parties of socialist countries can be categorized as follows: (1) research, planning and formulation of political line and policies, (2) training and selection of candidates for leadership, (3) instruction and supervision of state organs, and (4) indoctrination and ideological education and the mobilization of the people based on ideology. In addition to these real functions, the ruling parties of socialist countries also performed a “symbolic function.” This consisted of establishing the legitimacy of the system by impressing upon the people and the international community that the state was being governed under the direction of organs representing the “people,” such as the party congress and the party central committee. In candid terms, the latter symbolic function involved disguising the various decisions made by a small leadership group as being “based on the will of the people.”

Using the above as a basis for analysis, a re-examination of the functions of the party under a system of *Suryong* yields the following observations. First, it can be said that, given the absolute authority of the *Suryong* and the position assigned to the Leader in the ideological framework, the symbolic function of the party was not necessarily a requirement for the system. This is because the decisions of the *Suryong* were defined to be right in and of themselves, and the people were expected to obey and follow these decisions. However, this is not to deny that the party did possess the function of reinforcing the legitimacy of the system. Thus, in the case of North Korea, while the Congress of the Workers’ Party was not convened after 1980, plenary sessions of the Party Central Committee continued to be convened almost annually during the period between 1980 and the death of Kim Il-sung in 1994.

As for the real functions of the party, the following observations can be made. With the exception of the first function of formulating the political line and policies, for which the *Suryong* was invested with final decision-making authority, almost all other functions were understood to come under the

jurisdiction of the party. Especially with regard to the third and fourth functions, it is thought that the party in North Korea has actually wielded greater power than its counterparts in other socialist countries. The real functions of the party were performed by the following organizations. First are a series of departments (such as the Organization and Guidance Department and the Information Department, including their respective secretaries as leaders), which function under the Party Central Committee (and the several levels of party committees in each locality). Second are the party organizations established within state agencies and various social and popular organizations that are placed under the direction of the party. Therefore, as long as these standing institutions were operating normally, the real functions of the party could remain operational without any difficulty even if such non-permanent organs as the Congress of the Workers' Party or plenary sessions of the Party Central Committee met only once every few years or even if they were never convened.

2. Methods of Governing the Population

The next question that arises is how the population was placed under the rule of the *Suryong* and party. A look at the structure of North Korea's Workers' Party reveals that, in relation to population, it is far more immense in relative scale than the communist parties of the former Soviet Union and China.⁵ The scale of the party alone is enough to evidence its strong influence over society. Moreover, the North Korean system was characterized by multi-tiered regimentation of the people by means of numerous organizations and agencies that existed under the direction of the party and literally encompassed all aspects of society.

Of special importance among these were the so-called social and popular organizations that come under two categories. The first consists of stratum-specific organizations, such as the Kim Il-sung Socialist Youth League and the Korea Democratic Women's Union. The second consists of occupation-specific organizations, including the General Federation of Trade Unions of Korea (an organization for workers in the industrial sector), the Union of Agricultural Working People of Korea, the General Federation of Korean Scientists and Technicians, and the Korea Writers Union. Furthermore, the Korea Children's Union existed under the Youth League. As a result, with the exception of newborn babies, the great majority of the population belonged to some form of organization through their school or occupational affiliations. These organizations follow the lead of the party in conducting ideological education and indoctrination, and frequently are the unit of mobilization for contributing to economic construction.

The North Korean people are regimented under "neighborhood units" that are organized by area of residence and function as the smallest unit of local administration. Neighborhood units function to bridge security and other administrative agencies with local residents, and are additionally responsible for mutual surveillance and control of the activities of residents. Given that food rations were primarily distributed by locality and that housing could not be obtained other than through public assignment, it can be said that membership in neighborhood units was indispensable to maintaining life in North Korea. Consequently, the population could be and was very effectively controlled through neighborhood units.

Another aspect of the regimentation of the North Korean population relates to membership in military organizations. Firstly, North Korea maintains an extremely large number of active members of the military, which is reported to exceed one million. Additionally, the country has an extensive system of reserve forces comprising such organizations as the Reserve Military Training Corps, the Worker-Peasant Red Guards, and the Young Red Guards. These paramilitary organizations came under the command of the *Suryong*, who was also the Supreme Commander of the Korean People's Army, and were at the same

time rigorously governed by the party. Furthermore, reservists were subject to annual training periods and were temporarily called up and mobilized in times of external tension. Therefore, it was possible to conduct indoctrination and ideological education of the population and infuse society with a sense of urgency when needed.

From the above, it can be seen that basically the entire population of North Korea was fitted into a highly regimented power structure with the Leader at the pinnacle. This power structure was both multi-tiered and comprehensive, and was able to effectively govern various aspects of North Korean life. While serving as a channel for the distribution of food rations and housing, it also functioned as a conduit for indoctrination and saw to it that the population internalized its loyalty and obedience to power. The stability of this political system was made amply evident at the end of the 1980s when socialist states were falling one after the other and China experienced the events of Tiananmen Square. It is notable that at no time did the impact of this destabilized international environment affect North Korea.

3. “Succeeding to the Revolutionary Achievements of the *Suryong*”

As great as the Leader in this system of *Suryong* may be, he is ultimately human and cannot escape death. At the same time, it was believed that the process of completing the “revolutionary achievements of the *Suryong*” would require the attainment of “difficult and complex historic achievements,” and that this process would be exposed to the challenge of the “betrayers of the revolution and ambitious individuals who would try to usurp the spoils of the revolution.” To avoid this outcome, it was necessary for the death of the Leader to be followed by the accession of a “successor” under whose “guidance” continued efforts could be made to realize the vision that had been formulated by the Leader.

It can be said that by combining the previously mentioned “theory of socio-political organism” with this doctrine of succession, the system of *Suryong* was able to transform itself from dictatorship as a necessary evil to a system whose ultimate purpose is self-perpetuation.

However, when this issue is examined in light of historical reality, the unavoidable conclusion is that this doctrine of succession was manufactured to legitimize Kim Jong-il’s status as Kim Il-sung’s successor. The question then arises of why Kim Jong-il was appointed successor to Kim Il-sung at such an early stage⁶ during the lifetime of the latter. Firstly, lessons gleaned from Soviet criticism of Stalinism and China’s Lin Biao incident (drawing attention to the dangers of criticism and rebellion by successors) were a factor. Against this background, Kim Il-sung, who had established his dictatorship within the North Korean Workers’ Party in 1967 under the slogan of “monolithic ideological system,” and former members of the anti-Japanese partisan group that constituted his power base opted for stabilizing and perpetuating their own positions. This interpretation of events not only accords with the internal and external conditions surrounding North Korea at the time, but is also consistent with various developments related to the anti-Japanese partisan group itself. For instance, it is said the former members of the anti-Japanese partisan group very actively supported Kim Jong-il as a candidate for succession. Similarly, Kim Jong-il took advantage of his position of being in charge of the party’s cultural and propaganda activities to produce operas praising the anti-Japanese partisans, and it was widely reported that these productions were highly appreciated by the senior members of the leadership. Subsequently, Kim Jong-il was able to reinforce his own power base by acting faithfully to realize the objectives that he had been entrusted with. A good example of this process can be seen in “Let us produce, study and live like the anti-Japanese guerrillas,” a slogan advocated by Kim Jong-il. The fact that the “bloodline of the revolutionary tradition of Paektu” continues to be emphasized as a source of the legitimacy of the North Korean leadership even to the present day can be taken to be a reflection of its embodiment of these objectives of succession.

What this implies is that the succession of power from Kim Il-sung to Kim Jong-il goes beyond the mere hereditary transfer of power from father to son. Rather, it should be viewed as a decision that was made and implemented on the basis of an extremely high-level political judgment designed to respond to two critical questions: What should be the source of the legitimacy of power (or the system itself) in North Korea, and to what forces should the function of safeguarding legitimacy be assigned?

Therefore, even if some senior members from the ranks of the former anti-Japanese partisans had not supported the succession of Kim Jong-il, or even if the possibility cannot be denied that a difference of opinion may have existed between Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il regarding certain policy issues, such matters basically cannot be characterized as constituting a “power struggle.” It would be more correct to view the process as the transfer of power and authority founded on a broadly based consensus, either explicit or tacit, that went beyond Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il to include the leadership group. This interpretation of the salient feature of the succession is supported by the fact that many of the top officers of the former regime retained their positions for extended periods of time even after the transfer of power from Kim Il-sung to Kim Jong-il had been completed. In other words, it can be said that the top officers of the regime opted for hereditary succession as a means to maintain and guarantee their own “inter-generational” stability.

II. Transformation

A historical review of the North Korean *Suryong* system outlined above indicates that its framework was put in place during the 1970s. The system itself reached completion during the 1980s after a series of refinements, most of which were related to ideology. Thereafter, the system continued to function more or less in line with its conceptual framework until around the death of Kim Il-sung in 1994. It can be said that the smooth and uneventful transfer of power to Kim Jong-il testifies to this fact. However, soon thereafter, the system was exposed to a series of serious tests resulting from ongoing changes in the external and internal environments. Consequently, while the conceptual framework remained in place, changes could not be avoided in the actual execution and management of the system. These changes are summarized in the following sections.

1. The Politics of “Military First (*Songun*)”

The first test emerged in the mid-1990s in the turmoil that was later called the “arduous march.” In reality, North Korea had suffered serious blows to its economy starting in the early 1990s. Relations with the Soviet Union, its principal economic backer, had soured, and China was beginning to apply more rigorous terms-of-trade in its exchange of goods with North Korea. The situation took a dramatic turn for the worse when a series of floods devastated the country during 1995 and 1996. It is widely known that the resulting damage to North Korean agriculture led to the starvation and death of large numbers of people. The famine triggered serious and widening turmoil in society as large parts of the population, including party members, abandoned their workplaces and homes in search of food. Similarly, state-owned enterprises and other organizations abandoned their normal operations and in extreme cases resorted to selling off their equipment and facilities.⁷

As a result, the party and other organizations and agencies that had supported the *Suryong* system became dysfunctional as many of their activities were suspended. It is thought that, under these conditions, it became impossible to rigorously apply the strictures of the multi-tiered and comprehensive system of controlling the population as described above. It can be readily assumed that the people grew increasingly distrustful of the authorities, and that changes began to appear in how the internalized

ideology was viewed. The system suffered another blow in 1997 when Party Secretary Hwang Jang-yop, recognized to be the true father of *juche* ideology, defected to South Korea. It is unclear to what extent this defection affected the people of North Korea, but it certainly must have had an impact on the nation's elite. In this environment, the expected efficacy of ideology as a tool for controlling the population declined. Beginning at around this time, the publication of theses written in the name of Kim Jong-il on ideological theories stopped almost completely. While such expressions as "Red Flag ideology" did for some time appear in party organs and other publications, these did not go beyond the status of simple slogans and failed to be systematically integrated into ideological theories. It can be said that these developments definitely point to the declining function and weight of ideology in the political system. (However, this does not mean that activities featuring the presentation of political slogans, propaganda activities primarily appealing to the emotions through songs, movies, theater and television (activities referred to in North Korea as "agitation") were given less attention. Such activities continue to remain at high levels to the present day.)

Since the death of Kim Il-sung, plenary sessions of the Party Central Committee have not been convened even once. Plenary sessions were not called even when extremely important decisions were being made, such as the appointment of Kim Jong-il as General Secretary. This situation has continued through the 2010s. This means that none of the changes made in the membership of the Party Central Committee and the Politburo during this period have been based on the procedures prescribed under party rules. It can be inferred from this that the symbolic function of the party discussed above has also been dramatically downgraded.

In the course of this confusion, which may also be thought of as general turmoil affecting the entire political system, the Korean People's Army was the single institution that, albeit barely, was able to maintain its original organizational functions. As a result, the role of the military in governing the country grew, a development that was reflected in the following events. In 1998, the Supreme People's Assembly was convened for the first time since the death of Kim Il-sung, and a new system was presented in which Kim Jong-il would lead the nation as Chairman of the National Defense Commission and not as President of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, as in the case of his father. At the same time, the concept of "military first (*Songun*)" was advocated as indicative of the fundamental methodology in North Korea's political system. The term "military first" incorporates two intricately intertwined and inseparable commitments. These consist of prioritizing the military (national security) in the allocation of political resources, and identifying the military as the most important institution in governing the country. The latter is particularly important in examining the political system. It can be seen that, at the time, the term not only highlighted the military as the final fortress for preserving the system, but also pointed to the reality that the military was being mobilized in the economic sphere to undertake the construction of important facilities, engage in agricultural production and to even conduct road repairs. Moreover, the military spirit of absolute and self-sacrificing obedience to orders even in the face of the greatest difficulties (referred to as the "revolutionary spirit of soldiers") was frequently repeated in state propaganda as a model for the whole of society to live by. Prior to this, it was normal for the activities of party members to be presented as the model. This certainly represented a very major transition in the system, and may even be interpreted to mean that the military had surpassed the party in terms of political authority.

However, due attention must be paid to the fact that importance was being attached to the military as a political means (tool) and that the military itself was not being elevated to the role of political leadership. That role was strictly reserved for the "headquarters of revolution" centered on Kim Jong-il as the "Guiding Leader" and the successor to the *Suryong*, and the highest mission of the military was defined

to be that of “safeguarding” the leadership. Therefore, “military first” did not imply political leadership by the military, nor was it being used as a concept to legitimize a military regime. Moreover, it would be correct to conclude that the realities of North Korean political management at the time differed from any such interpretation of a military regime.

During the period of the “arduous march,” the principal real functions performed by the party to control and oversee the operations of state institutions and agencies were impacted by a wide range of turbulences. However, there are no grounds for saying that all such functions were transferred to the military. On the contrary, it would be more correct to conclude that, at the latest, the functions of the party had been restored to normalcy by the time “military first” began to be advocated. There is clear evidence from the subsequent period that the party was not being ruled by the military and that the military had not taken over the reins of political leadership. For instance, this can be seen in the arbitrary manner in which high-level military posts were being filled.

2. “Measures for the Improvement of Economic Management”

The period of transition that had followed the death of Kim Il-sung nominally ended with the convocation of the Supreme People’s Assembly in 1998 and the assumption of the post of Chairman of the National Defense Commission by Kim Jong-il. However, economic conditions remained dire to the point where distribution of food rations could not be conducted normally. In this environment, black markets and other forms of an “underground economy” began to emerge that stood in stark contrast to the socialist planned economy, the “face” of the national economy that remained under the direction of the authorities. These black markets became a widespread and normal phenomenon and came to play a critical role in the survival of the population. When observed in the framework of the system of *Suryong*, this development can be interpreted to mean that one of the important tools used by the authorities to control the population had ceased to function. In addition to facilitating the procurement of food, these black markets became a venue for buying and selling VCDs and DVDs of South Korean dramas, which implied that the long established control of information was coming apart at the seams and domination through ideology was being further eroded.

The banner of constructing a “strong and prosperous nation” was raised at around this time and remains a key slogan to this day. The objective of this slogan was to transform North Korea into a “great power in politics, ideology, military and economy.” “Building the economy” was presented as an urgent requirement in the attainment of this objective. The selection of this goal appears to embody the longing to end the state of non-normalcy and to return to the comprehensive integration of the population under the system of *Suryong*.

However, the program to reconstruct the economy under the direction of the authorities did not succeed, which stimulated the further growth of the “underground economy.” It was against this backdrop that the so-called “measures for the improvement of economic management” were introduced in 2002. Among various measures implemented, official prices and wages were revised to bring them into line with current market prices, and public markets were established. At the time, some interpreted these measures to be aimed at realizing a Chinese-style of “reform and openness.” However, a more accurate interpretation is that these measures were basically implemented for the purpose of heightening the effectiveness of the leadership of the authorities, halting the proliferation of the “underground economy” and reincorporating these activities into the “official economy.”⁸ For example, the authorities dramatically raised their purchase prices for foodstuff to stem the flow of supplies to black markets and to reinforce the official distribution system. Needless to say, the sharp increase in wages was similarly designed

to draw workers who were working in the “underground economy” to make their living away from there and back to their original workplaces. That the purpose of these policies was not the implementation of “economic reform” patterned after the Chinese model but rather the restoration of the planned economy becomes even more evident when subsequent developments are examined. Thus, when the food production situation improved somewhat in the mid-2000s, repeated efforts were made throughout the country (albeit unsuccessfully) to strengthen market restrictions and to reinstate the food ration system. Furthermore, in 2009, the currency was suddenly redenominated and replaced in a dramatic measure designed to deliver a serious blow to the “underground economy.”⁹

It can be concluded from the above that the original aim of the “measures for the improvement of economic management” was the reabsorption of the “underground economy” into the “official economy.” However, what actually resulted from these measures was the emergence of a situation that may be described as “driving the official economy underground.” As these measures were being implemented, some shrewd individuals succeeded in “entrepreneurship” through clever maneuvers. At the same time, state-owned enterprises, the military and various other government organizations began to openly engage in a wide range of profit-making activities. Due to these developments, significant disparities based on differences in economic power surfaced throughout society, and a so-called culture of “money worship” swept through the country.¹⁰ Concurrently, ideology and political doctrine as a source of power was undermined and the regime suffered a decline in its centripetal forces.

3. Changes in the Party in Preparation for Succession

It is reported that Kim Jong-il suffered a stroke in August 2008 and was temporarily incapacitated. It was not until October that his activities were again made public. What happened during this period remains unclear. However, there is no doubt that the change in his health status marked the start of full-fledged efforts to prepare a candidate for succession. It is notable that in the following year, 2009, a song lauding Kim Jong-un were popularized. While there are various conflicting theories on when and through what process the succession of Kim Jong-un was finalized, it can be said that inside North Korea, the public generally became aware of him sometime between early 2009 and spring of the same year.¹¹ The “150-day battle” and the “100-day battle,” two propaganda-led campaigns for increased production, were implemented in close succession during 2009, and it was during the latter that the abovementioned redenomination of the currency was enacted.

In September 2010, a Party Conference was held after a lapse of 30 years, the first time it had been convened since the Sixth Party Congress of 1980. One day before the Party Conference, Kim Jong-un was appointed General of the Korean People’s Army, together with Kim Kyong-hui, a sister of Kim Jong-il, and senior party leader Choe Ryong-hae (later appointed Director of the General Political Bureau of the Korean People’s Army). This marked the first time that Kim Jong-un’s name appeared in official reports. Immediately after the Party Conference had adjourned, the official positions of Kim Jong-un were Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission of the Workers’ Party, and ordinary member of the Central Committee. Thus, at this point, he was not a Politburo member, let alone a member of the Presidium of the Politburo. However, the coverage of Kim Jong-un in the North Korean media was thereafter gradually elevated to approximately the same status accorded to his father, clearly indicating that the position of Kim Jong-un was a special one.

During the Party Conference, a number of new appointments were made to fill out party leadership posts. These included members of the Party Central Committee, the Central Military Commission, and Politburo members, Alternate Politburo members, Presidium of Politburo members. This was the first

time that leaders had been formally elected in accordance with party rules since the death of Kim Il-sung. It was by no means an accident that the candidacy for the successor to Kim Jong-il had coincided with the new appointments to the party leadership.

There was yet another notable development that gained momentum during this period. The “measures for the improvement of economic management” had given birth to a “wealthy class” who responded to the redenomination of the currency and the subsequent loss of confidence in the North Korean won by pursuing activities that generated foreign currency income.¹² One of the factors fueling the quest for foreign currency reflected the preparations for the 100th anniversary of the birth of Kim Il-sung in 2012 that were moving forward parallel to the preparations for the accession of Kim Jong-un. As the stated goal for 2012 was “opening the gates to a strong and prosperous nation,” there was an urgent need to procure the foreign currency and materials needed for the large-scale construction projects that had been planned. It is believed that this encouraged a wide range of organizations to vie for the procurement of foreign currency.¹³ Given the remarkable differential between official and black market (actual) foreign exchange rates, it was clear that anyone with an opportunity to come into contact with foreign currencies was in a position to very easily amass huge economic benefits. The very strong negative effects of the redenomination of the currency were essentially concentrated on those “entrepreneurs” who had risen out of the general population and who owed their success and wealth to domestic activities. For the elite class and those closely tied to them that could engage in overseas economic activities, the impact of redenomination was either limited or not serious enough to be irreparable.

The “wealthy class” had come into being by exploiting certain aspects of the market economy that had become available to them. At the same time, the political characteristics of the “wealthy class” were such that their positions were assured by the various privileges and rights that they enjoyed under the existing system.¹⁴ In this sense, their existence did not necessarily contradict the existing system. Rather, it would be more accurate to say that the “wealthy class” existed essentially as a manifestation of vested interests.

III. Current Conditions

The preceding sections have focused on North Korea’s political framework and have outlined the basic principles of the North Korean system of *Suryong* and the changes that have occurred in it. Based on these discussions, current conditions in North Korea will be examined in the following sections with particular attention paid to determining the scope of Kim Jong-un’s leadership and ascendance, and the sources of the centripetal forces that support his regime.

1. Leadership and Ascendancy of Kim Jong-un

It is interesting to compare the position of Kim Jong-un at the death of Kim Jong-il versus the position of Kim Jong-il at the death of Kim Il-sung. In all factors relating to leadership and ascendancy, such as posts held, personal authority (charisma), past accomplishments, leadership experience and relationship with members of the leadership group, Kim Jong-un stood far behind the level achieved by his father. It is notable that Kim Jong-il had already been highly active for a total period of over twenty years at the time of his father’s death. That is, he had been active for several years before the formal decision on succession and for the subsequent six years before his official debut at the Sixth Party Congress. Following this, he was energetically engaged in his duties for 14 years leading up to the death of Kim Il-sung. Compared to this, Kim Jong-un succeeded his father less than three years after he was generally recognized as heir-apparent and was given a period of about one year to prepare from his official debut. Thus, the differences

between the two in terms of positions and status prior to succession can be said to have been unavoidable.

However, Kim Jong-un began to be called the “Guiding Leader” immediately after the death of Kim Jong-il. No sign of vacillation or hesitation can be seen in the transition to this title, indicating that his succession to power was a foregone conclusion before the death of his father and that preparations for his accession had been moving steadily forward. The “succession” from Kim Jong-il to Kim Jong-un had already been completed at this point, so that appointments to the posts of Supreme Commander of the Korean People’s Army, First Chairman of the National Defense Commission, and First Secretary of the Workers’ Party of Korea can be viewed merely as the procedural aspects of succession.

By being granted the status of “Guiding Leader” in the North Korean system of *Suryong* as described above, Kim Jong-un stood in a position to use the institutional “powers” that accompanied this status. Therefore, notwithstanding the weakness of having very little previous experience, Kim Jong-un was able to exercise considerable leadership power starting immediately after his accession. (While the leadership powers at his disposal did not match those of his father, they clearly transcended those of any other member of the existing leadership group.)

A rebuttal to this analysis is found in the argument that North Korea is actually governed through a system of “collective leadership.” But this line of thought has a number of weaknesses. First of all, this argument is contradicted by the ideology of *Suryong* and related propaganda slogans that continue to proliferate. If in fact North Korea is ruled through collective leadership and Kim Jong-un is no more than a figurehead, then there would be no reason to engage in propaganda activities promoting a personality cult. In the very least, such activities would be toned down. However, in reality, propaganda activities have been accelerated to a level reminiscent of the reign of Kim Jong-il. Secondly, it is highly doubtful that those purported to be members of “collective leadership” came to their posts as a result of any real powers that they possessed. The two principal supporters of the candidacy of Kim Jong-un at the death of Kim Jong-il were Jang Sung-taek and Ri Yong-ho, Chief of the General Staff of the Korean People’s Army. The latter of the two, however, was suddenly dismissed in June 2012. Suppose a “collective leadership” composed of persons in possession of real power did in fact exist. If that were the case, considerable political struggle and conflict would have been unavoidable when dismissing one of the most powerful members of the leadership group. However, no indication of such conflict has been reported since the dismissal. The inevitable conclusion from this would be that real power in the regime belonged to Jang Sung-taek (or to him and his wife, Kim Kyong-hui), in which case the term “collective leadership” would not apply to North Korea.

Another rebuttal is possible as an extension of the above argument. The second rebuttal posits that real power in the regime belonged to Jang Sung-taek (or to him and his wife, Kim Kyong-hui), and that he was reigning from behind the curtain with Kim Jong-un as a puppet. No serious contradictions can be found between this interpretation and contemporary realities, nor can any concrete evidence be presented to refute it. There is no doubt, however, that any such system would face the problem of sustainability over time. That is, how long would Jang Sung-taek remain satisfied as the “shadow ruler,” and how would his relation with Kim Jong-un change as the latter gained more experience, power and authority? This interpretation is exposed to further doubt when the original purpose and developments pertinent to the establishment of the *Suryong* system, including the “succession” system, are considered. In other words, was Jang Sung-taek really capable of ensuring the continuation of the “anti-Japanese partisan tradition?” To put it bluntly, was Jang Sung-taek in a position to preserve the privileges of the survivors and descendants of the anti-Japanese partisans? (That is, was there no risk that Jang Sung-taek

would attempt to “usurp the spoils of the revolution”?) It is difficult to believe that Kim Jong-il would leave behind a system ridden with such problems.

2. Centripetal Forces at Work in the Political System

The current situation in the North Korean political system was examined above in light of the conditions surrounding the “Guiding Leader.” A matter of equal interest in understanding the political system is the question of how centripetal forces have been maintained. Specifically, what “powers” are at play and what principles and motives operate to maintain centripetal forces? While full empirical analysis of these questions must await a future opportunity, two hypotheses are presented in this section for examination.

The first hypothesis posits that the elite class, comprised mainly of the anti-Japanese partisans and those related to them, has embraced (assisted and supported) Kim Jong-un as the “Guiding Leader” based on the *Suryong* system, and has consented or cooperated in the use of his authority (for the time being, the institutional authority vested in the “Guiding Leader” more than the personal authority wielded by Kim Jong-un) as the source of the system’s legitimacy. In so doing, the elite class is motivated by the desire to preserve its “vested interests,” which encompass both political positions and economic advantages. This can be restated to say that Kim Jong-un is viewed and supported as the representative of the privileged status of the descendants of the elite class. Strictly speaking, the scope of the elite class may not be limited to the above definition, and perhaps it would be more accurate to think of an entire stratum with vested interests consisting not only of the elite class but also containing an intermediate class that surrounds the elite and is, to a greater or lesser degree, positioned to gain from the benefits accruing to the elite.

The second hypothesis addresses the changes in the methods by which the general population, excluding the vested-interest stratum, is ruled and controlled. In the original framework, the country was ruled by controlling the population through various organizations centered on the party, through indoctrination and the internalization of ideology, and by using the food ration system to anchor the population to its geographic location and place of employment. However, as the effectiveness and importance of these conventional methods were diminished, there was no alternative but to become increasingly dependent on the “power” exercised by the military and security apparatus as a tool for governance. As a result, the importance of military and security apparatus was increased.

Applying these two hypotheses to recent developments in North Korea yields the following observations. With regard to the first hypothesis, the following developments can be viewed as reflecting the consideration being given to the invested-interest stratum. (1) Beginning with the appointment of Choe Ryong-hae as Director of the General Political Bureau of the Korean People’s Army, many recent appointees to the leadership group have been drawn from the ranks of individuals with ties to the anti-Japanese partisans. (2) While various measures are actively being taken to increase the inflow of foreign capital, including the strengthening of ties with China, extreme caution has been taken in implementing reforms in the planned economy that may potentially undermine the vested interests of the elite class. As for the second hypothesis, reports of the recent activities of Kim Jong-un include the following. (1) Kim Jong-un made two visits to the State Security Department (as reported on October 7 and November 21, 2012). (2) Kim Jong-un sent a congratulatory message to the meeting of branch social security stations’ chiefs of the People’s Security organ (held on November 23, 2012). (3) Kim Jong-un sent an “epistle” to the national conference of activists in judicial and procuratorial work (held on November 26, 2012). These are unprecedented activities for the “Guiding Leader” to undertake, and can be taken to be a reflection of the

emphasis that is being placed on the security apparatus. It is also notable that the abovementioned congratulatory message identifies police action against persons defacing the “statues of the heroes of the revolution” as a priority issue,¹⁵ indicating that such incidents have reached a level where they can no longer be ignored.

The following problems can be identified in the North Korean system if the above deductions concerning current conditions are correct. (1) The rallying and solidarity of the elite class is premised on the preservation of vested interests founded on special privileges, and is not based on the leadership qualities of the “Guiding Leader.” As such, this solidarity is voluntary in character and the elite class will not allow anyone to infringe upon its interests. This makes it very difficult for the state to utilize its resources (particularly foreign currencies) in a rational manner. (2) The control of the general population, excluding the vested-interest stratum, by means of “power” is more expensive to implement and more fragile than control through the internalization of ideology. Moreover, the promotion of economic construction through popular mobilization as seen in the past can no longer be expected to be viable.

The characteristics of the current political system as outlined above did not necessarily come into existence under the Kim Jong-un regime. Rather, these characteristics were gradually beginning to emerge during the closing years of the Kim Jong-il regime and were simply accelerated by the process of succession.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussions can be summarized as follows. It can be concluded that the current Kim Jong-un regime finds its support from four specific sources. (1) The legitimacy of the system of *Suryong* continues to be nominally advocated, and the position of the “Guiding Leader” as the object of absolute loyalty remains unchanged as a result of developments that took place under the Kim Jong-il regime. (2) The leadership structure of the party is tentatively in place and its functions have been more or less normalized. (3) The vested-interest stratum has become affluent, and their support for the “community of interest” functions as a vital centripetal force in the system. (4) As the general population’s loyalty to the regime has declined, the system has come to rely mainly on the military and security apparatus to control and govern the people.

The current system as described above is both more fragile and inefficient as compared to the system that functioned under Kim Jong-il. However, the current system has achieved its own state of equilibrium and cannot necessarily be branded as being unsustainable.

When the United States first engaged in nuclear negotiations with North Korea in 1994, its fundamental assumption was that the Kim Jong-il regime would sooner or later collapse. It is reported that it was based on this assumption that the United States concluded a framework agreement that included the provision of light water reactors to North Korea. The beginning of 2013 will mark the launch of three new administrations in Japan, the United States and South Korea. It is sincerely hoped that each of these administrations will avoid the pitfalls of such wishful thinking in their interactions with the Kim Jong-un regime, and that they will opt for cautious and appropriate responses based on an accurate grasp of current conditions in North Korea.

1 This paper examines both the static aspects of the political structure, such as the structure of principal government organizations, and the dynamic aspects that relate to the principles of governing the population and the centripetal forces at play in the system.

2 Masayuki Suzuki, “*Kita Chosen: Shakaishugi to Dento no Kyomei*” [North Korea: Confluence of Socialism and Tradition],

- University of Tokyo Press (1992), 6.
- 3 For an analysis of the formative process and theoretical content, see Suzuki [1992], 129-139.
 - 4 For an analysis of the aspects of religiosity, see Han S. Park, "The Nature and Evolution of Juche Ideology," Han S. Park, *North Korea*, Prentice-Hall (1996), 14-17.
 - 5 Membership in the communist parties of the Soviet Union at the time of its disbandment and of present-day China was equivalent to about 6% of the population. By contrast, membership in the North Korean Workers' Party was estimated to be approximately 3 million at the time of the 1980 Party Congress, which is roughly equivalent to 16% of the population.
 - 6 It is generally believed that a formal decision was made in 1974. However, Suzuki [1992: 83] speculates that a consensus was reached among "certain members of the leadership" during 1967-68. Haruki Wada ("*Kita Chosen Gendai Shi*" [Contemporary History of North Korea], Iwanami Shinsho (2002), 132) cites a theory that Kim Jong-il emerged as the successor "several years before" the 60th birthday of Kim Il-sung in 1972.
 - 7 *Rimjin-gang*, No. 5 (2011), 70.
 - 8 For details of these measures, see Takashi Sakai, "*Keizai Kaikaku Kaiho no Igi to Genjo*" [Significance and Current Situation of Economic Reform and Opening] in Masao Okonogi (ed.), "*Kimu Jon-iru Jidai no Kita Chosen*" [North Korea during the Age of Kim Jong-il], Japan Institute of International Affairs (1999).
 - 9 As an adjustment of the unit of the currency, redenomination in itself does not affect the ownership of wealth. However, the issuance of new bank notes that was simultaneously implemented involved limits placed on conversion from cash (persons holding amounts exceeding this limit were forced to place these funds on deposit), and old bank notes were nullified over a very short period of time (a ban on the use of foreign currencies was also announced). This meant that much of the funds held by the "wealthy class" became wastepaper.
 - 10 Yunyon Cho, "*Kita Chosen no Riaru*" [Reality of North Korea], Toyo Keizai (2012), 154.
 - 11 Cho [2012], 17-19.
 - 12 Cho [2012], 123.
 - 13 A good example of this is the announcement of the "national economic development strategic plan" by the Korea Taepung International Investment Group, in which Kim Yang-gon, Director of the International Department of the Workers' Party of Korea, is involved. See Hisashi Hirai, "*Kita Chosen no Shido Taisei to Kokei*" [North Korea's Governance System and Succession], Iwanami Gendai Bunko (2011), 354.
 - 14 An example of this is the management of a state-owned "procurement store" whose management was assigned by the supervisory agency in charge to a prominent individual who was able to pocket monopoly profits from the sale of industrial goods that was generally prohibited. See *Rimjin-gang*, No. 5 (2011), 95.
 - 15 Rodong Sinmun, November 24, 2012.