



## Kim Jong Un's "Delegation Politics" and Changes in Status and Roles of the North Korean Power Elites

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The National Intelligence Service (NIS) said in a closed-door briefing to the Intelligence Committee of the National Assembly on August 20 that Kim Jong Un is on "delegate rule" by transferring his authority to some of his close aides, including his younger sister Kim Yo Jong, the first vice department director of the Central Committee of the Worker's Party of Korea (C.C., WPK). At the time, NIS also said, "Kim Jong Un still wields absolute power, but has gradually transferred power compared to the past." It added, "the First Vice Director Kim Yo Jong was given the most authority including overall control over the policies towards South Korea and the United States. Pak Pong Ju, vice-chairman of the C.C., WPK and Kim Tok Hun, the premier of the DPRK Cabinet, were delegated a little authority in the economic field." NIS also mentioned that authority in military sector is partially transferred to Choe Pu Il, the party's department director for military affairs, and Ri Pyong Chol, vice-chairman of the WPK Central Military Committee.

However, the term "delegation politics" is believed to be a more appropriate term than "delegated rule" in explaining Kim Jong Un's governing style, considering the common North Korean terminologies of "military-first politics [the Songun Politics]" and "love for the people [Aemin Politics]" for personnel policies and human resources tactics. As for Kim Jong-un's "delegation politics," it could be defined as a way for the top leader to maintain the final decision-making power but at the same time to give key officials considerable authority over policy making in the designated areas while holding them firmly accountable by promoting or demoting them based on the results of their decision-making.

Kim Jong Un appointed Choe Ryong Hae, a well-known figure of the second generation North Korean anti-Japan partisan groups, as the director of the General Political Bureau of the Korean People's Army (KPA) in 2012. Kim, then, gave Choe

a higher position and a greater power than those of the then-chief of the General Staff of the KPA and the then-minister of the People's Armed Forces, leading to reform and generational change in the military within a short period of time. If Kim had carried out a generational shift in the military himself, the military's discontent would have been directed at Kim, but he had delegated power to Choe and assigned him a "vicious role." Kim also appointed reform-minded Pak Pong Ju to the prime minister in 2013 and gave a full support to Pak's economic reforms. As a result, the North Korean economy, which had been in a prolonged slump since the collapse of the socialist bloc, has returned to a recovery phase since Kim Jong Un took power. The market has noticeably expanded, attracting foreign interests. Competition has proliferated in all economic sectors in which "the trap of average" had prevailed. In addition, advanced and efficient management methods have been stressed unprecedentedly. Based on these facts, it can be said that Kim's "delegation politics" began from the early days of his leadership.

At the top front page of the Rodong Sinmun on August 30, North Korea introduced articles about field inspections on the site of typhoon damage recovery in South Hwanghae Province, which were very unusual and unconventional as these inspections were conducted by Pak Pong Ju, vice-chairman of the C.C., WPK, and Kim Tok Hun, premier of the DPRK Cabinet. So far, the front page of the Rodong Sinmun has been devoted only to introducing the leader Kim Jong Un's public activities and the diplomatic visits of the President of the Presidium of the DPRK Supreme People's Assembly. Until this time, public activities of the Cabinet's prime ministers and the party officials have always been introduced on the second or the third or the fourth page.

Furthermore, on the front page of the Rodong Sinmun on September 1, articles and photos of "field guidances" on the typhoon-damaged sites, which were conducted by Ri Pyong Chol and Pak Pong Ju, the members of the Presidium of the Political Bureau of the C.C., WPK, and vice-chairmen of the C.C., WPK, were posted. It indicates that Kim's "delegation politics" continues to evolve in a way that further enhances the status of key executives and advances their role.

The Rodong Sinmun on September 1 is worth attention in three aspects.

First, the released photos of the article on September 1 in the Rodong Sinmun showed both Ri Pyong Chol and Pak Pong Ju, the members of the Presidium of the Political Bureau of the C.C., WPK, but by locating Ri Pyong Chol's photos to the left than that of Pak Pong Ju, it verified that Ri's status is ranked higher than Pak as the Enlarged Meeting of the Political Bureau and the Meeting of the Executive Policy Bureau of the C.C., WPK held on August 25 had confirmed. Ri Pyong Chol is the current vice-chairman of the WPK Central Military Committee and the director of the Munitions Industry Department. When Ri was elected to the member of the Presidium

of the Political Bureau at the Meeting of the Political Bureau of the C.C., WPK on August 13, his was placed fifth after the Prime Minister of the Cabinet Kim Tok Hun. At the Enlarged Meeting of the Political Bureau on August 25, however, Ri Pyong Chol sat right next to Kim Jong Un, overtaking Pak Pong Ju and Kim Tok Hun, and showed that his position was escalated to the third rank in the hierarchy. Such change of his status has been reaffirmed in the photos published on September 1 in Rodong Sinmun. The fact that Kim Jong Un gave the Munitions Industry Department Director Ri Pyong Chol higher position than the two-top officials in the economic sector (Pak Pong Ju and Kim Tok Hun) and the two-top officials in the military sector (director of the General Political Bureau of the KPA and the chief of the General Staff of the KPA), suggests that Kim Jong Un considers the modernization of the defense sector, which focuses on the development and deployment of strategic weapons and the restructuring of the existing large-scale military units into smaller-scale units with strategic weapons, as one of the most important national goals.

Secondly, the September 1 Rodong Sinmun used the term “guide (지도)” and posted pictures of field inspections to damaged areas for a recovery project, conducted not by the members of the Presidium of the Political Bureau of the C.C., WPK, but by the vice-chairmen of the C.C., WPK. It is an unconventional attempt in using the term “guide” for the activities of vice-chairmen. In the past, North Korea used the term “field survey (현지요해)” for on-site inspections of high-ranking officials in a way to signify that their roles are only to check the situation. And thus, the term “guide” was solely used for Kim Jong Un and the party. This time, however, the use of the term “guide” for public activities by Ri Pyong Chol, Pak Pong Ju and other vice-chairmen of the C.C., WPK suggests that Chairman Kim has officially delegated authority and given power to make practical instructions during officials’ field inspections.

Third, it is also worth paying attention to the fact that the Rodong Sinmun named the vice-chairmen of the C.C., WPK in the order of Kim Jae Ryong (former Premier of the Cabinet), Ri Il Hwan (Director of the Propaganda and Agitation Department), Choe Hwi (Director of the Labor Organizations Department), Pak Thae Dok (Director of Agriculture Department), Kim Yong Chol (Director of South Korean Affairs), and Kim Hyung Jun (Director of the International Affairs Department). When the North Korean media names high-ranking officials, it is common to order the name of the Director of the Organization Department of the C.C., WPK before the name of the Director of the Propaganda and Agitation Department. In 2012 and 2013, Jang Song Thaek, the Director of the Administration Department of the C.C., WPK (a department in charge of inspecting judicial, prosecution, and public security organizations), was also called before the Director of the Propaganda and Agitation Department. Therefore, in light of the order of the names, Kim Jae Ryong is presumed to be serving as a director at the most core department of the C.C., WPK, such as the Organization

Department or a new department created at the 16th Enlarged Meeting of Political Bureau of the 7th C.C., WPK on August 13. A new department is presumed to be similar to the former Administration Department of the C.C., WPK, which was removed in 2013 with the execution of Jang Song Thaek. (The new department's name is reportedly "Organization and Administration Department (조직행정부).") Kim Jong Un said at the enlarged meeting that the new department of the C.C., WPK "will make tangible contribution to safeguarding the dignity and interests of the state and people, reliably supporting and guaranteeing the political stability and order of the society and impregably defending our class position and socialist construction."

Given that Kim Jong Un's "delegation politics" has already begun in earnest since 2012, it is hard to say that such governing style has anything to do with his health condition. More feasibly, with Kim unable to look into details of all the complex domestic and foreign issues, his delegation politics is rather a "strategic choice" to give senior officials considerable authority and hold them accountable, so that he can concentrate on more key policy decisions. However, it is important to pay attention to the actual impact of "delegation politics" of North Korea to its overall policies on the South, foreign affairs, security, and economic fields as Kim Jong Un's current governing style could lead to immature decisions of some officials, namely Kim Yo Jong's command to blow up the Inter-Korean Liaison Office. ♣

※ *Translator's note: This is a summarized unofficial translation of the original paper which was written in Korean. All references should be made to the original paper.*

※ *This article is written based on the author's personal opinions and does not reflect the views of the Sejong Institute.*