



## North Korea's WPK Rule Revision and the Evaluation of Kim Jong Un's Status Change

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According to the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) Rules, the party's "highest leadership organization" is the Party Congress. The Party Congress had never been held during Kim Jong Il era, but after Kim Jong Un took the office, it was held since 2016 including this year similar to Kim Il Sung era, which is becoming a crucial opportunity to announce the Party's mid to long-term line and restructure Party leaderships extensively.

North Korea held the 8th Congress of WPK in January this year, about four years and eight months after the 7th Congress of WPK in 2016. The Congress evaluated its activities over the past five years and proposed policy goals for the next five years. They also revised the Party's rules to change the title of the Party's highest position from "Chairman" to "General Secretary" and appointed Kim Jong Un to this position, further reinforcing his sole leadership.

Rodong Sinmun, the organ of North's WPK, stated that the 8th Congress of WPK "formulated the people-first politics as the basic political mode under socialism." The revised rule at the 7th WPK Congress stipulated that "the Workers' Party of Korea establishes the Songun politics as a basic political method of socialism, and leads the revolution and construction under the banner of Songun." In order to maintain the regime, Kim Jong Il relied on the Songun politics which put more emphasis on the military than the people, whereas Kim Jong Un stipulated in the Party rule that he adopts the "people-first politics' as a basic political methods." emphasizing the people more than the military.

Rodong Sinmun mentioned that in the section of unification and fighting tasks of the preface of the revised rule clearly states "to protect stability and peaceful environment of the Korean peninsula by suppressing fundamental military threats with strong

defense power.” It further explained that “it is a reflection of our Party’s unwavering stance to ensure everlasting peaceful stability on the Korean peninsula and advance the historical feat of unification based on strong national defense power.

The revised rule at the 7th WPK Congress reads in the preface, “The WPK actively supports the struggle of the people of South Korea for expelling U.S. and other foreign invasions, Japanese militarism and its re-invasion scheme, striking for democratization and survival rights. We will work together to reach unification and achieve unified development on the principle of independent, peaceful unification with greatest national solidarity.” In other words, the existing Party rule was showing that it would drive out the U.S. from South Korea and supports South Korea’s revolution, reaching to a successful regime and federal unification, in accordance with the “National Liberation People’s Democratic Revolution Line” in the Kim Il Sung era.

However, looking at the North’s announcement this time, it is judged that they have finally deleted the unrealistic and infeasible “National Liberation People’s Democratic Revolution Route” from the Party’s rule. Instead, as North Korea chooses the line that realizes not only stabilization of the Korean peninsula but also unification with its superior defense power based on nuclear and missiles, it is expected to show a more coercive attitude toward South Korea, as their nuclear and missile capabilities is become more advanced in the future.

Regarding the time cycle of the Congress, North Korea added to the Article 22 of the WPK’s protocol that the Congress be convened every five years and revised the announcement of the Congress call to be made several months in advance. The revised rule at the 6th Party Congress in 1980 stipulated that the Congress should be held every five years, but this regulation was not properly followed for the next thirty years, thus North Korea deleted this rule at the 3rd Congress in 2010. Then, after Kim Jong Un took office, North Korea held the 7th WPK Congress in 2016 and the 8th Congress after five years in 2021. Adding the rule on the holding period of the Congress may be interpreted as showing Kim Jong Un’s confidence in national administration.

North Korea also stated that “In connection with the fact that not only the Party but also the political organizations including governmental institutions, working groups, and social organizations have their highest position identically named as ‘chairman,’ they revised the title from ‘chairman’ and ‘vice-chairman’ to ‘chief secretary,’ ‘secretary,’ and ‘vice-secretary’ to ensure the Party’s authority as the highest form of political organization.” And North Korea appointed Kim Jong Un as its new General Secretary to the WPK.

North Korea decided to enlist Kim Jong Il as the General Secretary of the WPK “forever” at the 4th Party Delegation in 2012, and elected Kim Jong Un to the Party’s highest new position as “First Secretary of the WPK.” Yet, North Korea denied the decision made from the 4th WPK Congress and elected Kim Jon Un to the position

of “WPK General Secretary.” In addition, North Korea switched the existing “Secretariat” to the “Executive Policy Bureau” at the 7th Congress, but again abolished the “Executive Policy Bureau” system at the 8th Party Congress and revived the “Secretariat” of the Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il era.

The reason that North Korea returned to the former general secretary and secretariat system and denying of the 4th Party Congress written decision is believed due to having too many “chairman” positions established at each level and thus leads to lack of Kim Jong Un’s authority. With North Korea’s re-introduction of the general secretary and secretariat system, the title “general secretary” is now only used for Kim Jong Un, and the title for the head of the local party is changed from “chairman” to “chief chairman,” which is clearly distinguished from Kim Jong Un’s position.

There was also a phenomenon in which about ten “vice-chairman” existed within the “Executive Policy Bureau” when changing the existing secretariat system to the Executive Policy Bureau at the 7th Party Congress. However, as the position of “vice-chairman” which gives the impression of “second-in-command” was changed to “secretary” giving the impression of executive officer, Kim Jong Un’s authority has risen and the rest of the key executive members’ authority became relatively low. In the end, the reason why Kim Jong Un tested the “first secretary” and the “chairman” of the WPK system after taking power but eventually returned to “general secretary” is because he thinks that the general secretary system has an advantage over supreme leader’s sole dictatorship.

In the wake of the 8th Party Congress, North Korea abolished the legacy of the past Songun politics in the Kim Jong Il era, and clearly expressed his intention to take the lead in inter-Korean relations and unification based on strong nuclear force and strengthened governance. ❖

※ *Translator’s note: This is an 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.*