

Policy Forum 08-080: Has the Next Great Leader of North Korea Been Announced?

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By Rudiger Frank

CONTENTS

[I. Introduction](#)

[II. Article by Rudiger Frank](#)

[III. Nautilus invites your responses](#)

I. Introduction

Rudiger Frank, Professor of East Asian Economy and Society and Vice Director of the East Asian Institute at the University of Vienna, writes, "This time, we could see the Party taking over the role

of a church, safeguarding ideology and the leadership of the two "Eternal" leaders, forming or organizing the collective leadership that seems to be the only logical step, and appointing a leader who will not be Great but visible. The recent homage to the Party's monument could be the first step in the process of announcing this solution; the next Great Leader of North Korea could be Mother Party."

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II. Article by Rudiger Frank

- "Has the Next Great Leader of North Korea Been Announced?"

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Why it makes sense to read North Korean media

Something big could be going on in North Korea. There is a possibility that in early October, the official North Korean media have started revealing who will be the next leader of their country after the family dynasty ends. But they have not done so directly yet. Therefore, we need some form of contextualization before arriving at still speculative conclusions.

Socialist economies with ideology-based political systems, such as North Korea, are known for treating not only essential but also minor issues with the highest level of secrecy. This is because in a system where coordination is highly centralized, political power monopolized and executed by a strictly hierarchical command chain, the top leadership is responsible for the slightest detail. So every failure is seen as the leadership's fault, and information is carefully filtered to protect the leadership and the political system itself. George Orwell got it perfectly right when he made the Ministry of Truth the centerpiece of his "1984".

However, this obsession with tight control of information is also one of the weaknesses of the system. Politically aware people in socialist countries tend to read official publications much more carefully than their compatriots in liberal democracies are used to. Often, they discover messages that the leadership rather had not seen unveiled. And while one might not get proper information on all facts and issues, we can be sure that the state-controlled media reflect the leadership's point of view, since it is their job to communicate this position to the population. This is quite valuable, for otherwise we find it difficult to assess what Kim Jong-il might have in mind. Even in an ideology-based society, though it looks like a powerful dictatorship to us, the leaders have to justify what they do. Important measures have to be prepared, as it was the case with the July 2002 economic adjustments.

It would be hard to imagine that the question of leadership after Kim Jong-il would not be prepared properly by the mass media in North Korea. This is why analysts instantly react to unusual reports about personalities such as the mothers of Kim Jong-il's sons or other relatives. If there will be the announcement of a new leader, we will in all likelihood know in advance if we carefully read the Rodong Sinmun. And while the North Korean leaders know that we do so, they cannot do much about it because the primary readers are the North Korean people - and they need to be prepared for whatever comes next to ensure their acceptance.

I have argued since 2004 that the succession by a third Great Leader is very unlikely and that we will have to expect a form of collective leadership headed by a figure that would be a primus inter pares, like the Pope in the Catholic Church. I have supported this mainly by showing that Kim Jong-il

has so far done little to turn himself into the original source of legitimacy which would have enabled him to pass this function onto one of his sons. Instead, he chose to leave this function with his late father, turning his sons into grandsons of the Great Leader, which might be too weak to ensure the strong control that would be needed to keep the country together in what doubtlessly are very tough times on all fronts. In order to prevent that things get out of control, such a change must look like continuity. The legitimization must come from the current leader, and the collective must be based on existing and known power groups.

A Hint from the Rodong Sinmun

So what is the hint that might be hidden in the Rodong Sinmun of October 8th? Don't look for "Successor of Chairman Kim Jong-il Announced", as nice as it would be to read such an article. But what about this: "Monument to Party Founding Draws Endless Crowd of Visitors". This might be just another form of dull socialist reporting about events that nobody cares about except for the editors and their bosses. But it also might be the missing hint that we are so desperately looking for. To begin with, it is remarkable that there are many monuments to Kim Il-sung, but none to Kim Jong-il, and none to the military as an institution (though there are numerous ones for soldiers and battles, of course). The only political entity beyond the Eternal President that is honored by a monument is the Party. The monument was built in 1995, which was not only the 50th anniversary of the official Party founding day, but also one year after the death of Kim Il-sung.

It is conspicuous to read about 4.2 million domestic and 200,000 overseas visitors, as well as a daily average of 2,000 military servicepersons. Bowing down in front of a monument is a universal gesture of submission and obedience. To make this even more obvious, the article goes on to explain that all the visitors including party functionaries, military personnel and state officials were "briefed" on the monument and reacted with deep emotion and respect. We learn that the Party is a mass political organization of the Juche type (not socialism or Seongun). The article ends with the statement that the Party is invincible on the basis of an outstanding idea and "dynamic" leadership. The latter could be a reference to the flexible nature of Juche and the ability of the leader to adjust to a changing environment. But it could also indicate a position that the Juche idea, preserved by the Party, the mother of all North Korean people, would be forever while leadership could change.

If we would drive Kremlinology to extremes, we could argue that Juche dominates Seongun, that the military subordinates itself under the command of the Party, and that the Party's status is being restored to the leading function it would be expected to wield in any classical socialist system. This corresponds well with the idea that the next leadership in North Korea will be of a collective type, and that continuity is the key to stability.

Past Coverage of Party Foundation Day

October 10th is the day marking the Party's foundation, so this kind of reporting could just be standard-type self-praise on the occasion of an anniversary. A look at the related reporting in 2000-2007, however, does not reveal anything similar. On the contrary; it is the first time that a party foundation anniversary has been celebrated with coverage of visits at the 1995 monument. We also notice that the tone of related articles has undergone an interesting change, as the following brief analysis demonstrates.

In 2000, emphasis of Rodong Sinmun reporting around October 10th was on reunification and Kim Il-sung's proposal for the Democratic Federal Republic of Goryeo. In 2001, the population was reminded of the 4th anniversary of Kim Jong-il's election to General Secretary of the WPK along with praise for his Military First Policy. To make clear who was to revere, an article on the "Revolutionary Spirit of Soldiers" was added on Oct. 9th, providing contrast to some praise for the "invincible" Party

one day later. This clearly was the time of Seongun, the recipe for overcoming the "arduous march". In 2002, the decisive role of ideology was emphasized. The Party was lauded as the guide of the Korean people, with heavy emphasis on its economic achievements. And a few days after Assistant Secretary of State Kelly's visit to Pyongyang and just before his statement that marked the beginning of the second nuclear crisis, in an article describing the Party's rosy future it was made clear that military affairs had to be placed above all else.

In 2003, Rodong Sinmun pointed at the now 6th anniversary of Kim Jong-il taking the Party leadership. Again, the People's Army was stressed as the core and main force of the Party. In 2004, no article reminded North Koreans of Kim Jong-il's anniversary as General Secretary. Instead, the spirit of self-reliance was put forward as the central theme, making clear that not bowing down to any outside pressure including sanctions was the sure way to victory in all fields. In 2005, the Rodong Sinmun went one step further, arguing that the Party had made great contributions to the global cause of human independence by putting forward Seongun. At its 60th anniversary, the Party was again displayed as the great mother of its children, the people. The word Seongun did not appear this time. It was, however, back one year later, when it was declared that in this Seongun era, it was the consistent policy of the Party to "remold man". A ground-breaking ceremony was held for a monument for "Protectors of Arts for Century", identified as Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il. On Oct. 8th, the "40-odd year history" of Kim Jong-il's leadership over the Party was celebrated in an editorial, partly explaining why his election to Secretary General had not been mentioned anymore, but also leaving one wonder on what function this claim was based. Seongun was not mentioned; one day later, Rodong Sinmun reported about the country's first nuclear test.

In 2007, an article praised the People's Army, reminding of a banquet speech of Kim Il-sung as far back as 1947 but omitting Seongun. The Army was displayed as a loyal instrument with duties assigned by "the Party, the leader, the country, and the people" (in that order). Note that the Party comes first, even before the leader, and that there is no description of the military as the core or main force of the Party. On Oct. 9th, an article summarized the history of the Party and reminded North Koreans that it was Kim Il-sung's Party. The single-minded unity of party, leader and people was called for.

Mother Party, the Next Great Leader

As we see, the Monument to the Party's foundation has not been mentioned in Rodong Sinmun reporting around Oct. 10th before 2008. In centralized, controlled societies, one has to look for the unusual to find traces of change. This might be one such example. Or North Korean journalists were just trying to fill some empty pages by reporting about a politically correct, but largely meaningless event. Time will tell.

What could happen next? For quite some time, the North Korean media have been pointing at the year 2012, the 100th birthday of late Kim Il-sung, the Eternal President, as an important turning point. This could be the year of the long-awaited 7th Party Congress, 32 years after the 6th in 1980. Let's not forget that this congress had served the purpose of officially introducing Kim Jong-il as the next leader. This time, we could see the Party taking over the role of a church, safeguarding ideology and the leadership of the two "Eternal" leaders, forming or organizing the collective leadership that seems to be the only logical step, and appointing a leader who will not be Great but visible. The recent homage to the Party's monument could be the first step in the process of announcing this solution; the next Great Leader of North Korea could be Mother Party.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send

responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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[Return to top](#)

[back to top](#)

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