

Policy Forum 10-040: Inspector O and the SPA Music Hall

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Inspector O and the SPA Music Hall

Policy Forum 10-040: July 20th, 2010

James Church

CONTENTS

[I. Introduction](#)

[II. Article by James Church](#)

[III. Nautilus invites your responses.](#)

I. Introduction

James Church is the pseudonym of is a former Western intelligence officer with decades of experience in Asia. This article is a fictional conversation between himself and Inspector O, the protagonist of his novels, on the recent Supreme People's Assembly meeting in the DPRK. His most recent book in the Inspector O series is [The Man with the Baltic Stare](#).

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Mansudae Assembly Hall, which houses the Supreme People's Assembly.

II. Article by James Church

-“Inspector O and the SPA Music Hall”

By James Church

I didn't suppose it was by chance that Inspector O was standing next to a gingko tree outside of my hotel.

“Long time no see, Inspector.”

“Yeah. Long time.”

“I take it you were not at the meeting of the Supreme People's Assembly last week.”

“Actually, I was. I had duty downstairs. I'm the one that passes out the rubber stamps.” He gave me a sideways smile.

“So, you know what happened?”

“Something happened? At an SPA meeting?”

“You mean you weren't surprised.”

“By what? It was an SPA meeting as usual, nothing happened, same as always. I've never seen one that made much of a difference.”

“But there were plenty of personnel changes this time, or so I've heard.”

“Or so you've heard! Admit it, you were drooling over the reports, just like the rest of your friends. ‘Personnel change’, fancy words. People were moved around, that's all. What's the use of being king

if you can't move people around? New vice ministers, new ministry chiefs—this one recalled, that one appointed. When the music stops, take a chair, any chair.”

“Even for you, that’s a little cynical. I mean, you have a new premier. That counts for something. “

“Sure, he was sort of the mayor of Pyongyang. The South Korean “president” was the mayor of Seoul, wasn’t he? (Notice when I said “president” I did it to indicate quotation marks around the word. We do that.) Apparently someone up there has a sense of humor. Parallel universes, you think?”

“I hope you aren’t arguing that’s the main reason your man was chosen.”

“I don’t know why he was chosen. They don’t consult me. It doesn’t really make much difference. He’ll be there for a few years, then he’ll be gone.”

“But didn’t I read he was appointed on recommendation of the Political Bureau?”

(Pause) All right, I’ll grant you that was interesting. I reread that part of the report twice, actually. Do you know the last time the party Political Bureau recommended anything?”

“No.”

“Neither do I. I’m not even sure the Politburo exists anymore in anything but name and in the titles of a few old party types. Even the party’s existence I’m not so sure about anymore. When was the last time there was a central committee plenum? Twenty years ago? And now, all of a sudden the Political Bureau is recommending who should be premier? Where did that come from? A long time ago, we used to have central committee plenums just before SPA meetings. Did you know that? The plenum made the decisions; then the SPA gave them the stamp of approval. It was quite nice.” O leaned toward me. “I’ll let you in on a little secret. There are still some people who are hoping that the party will make a comeback. The NDC can’t manage things in the countryside, no one can ‘join’ the NDC, no one gets into a university, or a better job, or nicer housing because of the NDC. Bunch of old men, that’s all. The idea that we should follow the army has always struck some people as-let me choose a good word here—uninspired.”

“What about all the new vice premiers?”

“What about them? You appoint a new premier, you appoint new vice premiers. That’s how it goes. Fish gotta swim, birds gotta fly.”

“What about Jang Song Taek?”

“Yes?” An eyebrow twitched slightly.

“You know the man?”

“I waved his car through an intersection one time. He didn’t slow down.”

“Speaking of cars, what do you suppose happened to Ri Je Kang? Can’t have been good for the Organization and Guidance Department. It’s practically decapitated, losing two first deputy directors in the space of eight weeks.”

“(Lengthy pause) I’m not in the Traffic Bureau. I don’t do car accidents. I’m also not in the life insurance business.”

"But you've heard something, surely. Ri's accident happened in the wee hours of the morning, not much traffic then."

(Another pause) "You want to talk about Jang or don't you?"

"All right, what about his appointment to vice chairman of the NDC? Significant move, wouldn't you say?"

"Ho hum."

"You don't think that's important?"

"It's getting not to be such an exclusive group. Now there are five of them. In February last year, when O Kuk Ryol became vice chairman, he was appointed by a decision by the DPRK National Defense Commission and the party Central Military Commission. That decision was signed by General Kim Jong Il in his capacity as chairman of both of those. Notice I didn't say "Dear Leader." We stopped using that term years and years ago. You people seem wedded to it for some reason."

"And?"

"And Jang was recommended by General Kim and then "elected" by the SPA. Pretty much the same as when the new NDC was named at the SPA session in April last year. Chew on that, my friend."

"Chew on what?"

"Why couldn't they have waited 60 days to name O Kuk Ryol in 2009? What was the rush?"

"You saying Jang is less important than O because they waited to name him?"

"No, only that if you're going to pick every analytical nit, you've got to notice the difference in their appointment announcements, and timing, and explain them. After a few glasses of vodka, I might be able to that for you."

"Too early to drink. You'll admit it was unusual, having two SPA sessions so close together."

"The unusual happens around here, if you haven't noticed. This is not a place where rules are unbending. Look at what happened a few months ago. A lot of KPA officers were promoted. Then barely a week later, a second round of promotions. Very odd. People scratched their heads."

"You think things are starting to wobble?"

O leaned against the tree and looked casually around. "When was the second SPA session called?"

"I don't know, in mid May I think."

"You think. It was May 18th, about five weeks after the previous session. Why didn't they just make all those changes in April? It just occurred to someone in May that the Ministry of Light Industry or the Foodstuff Industry needed housecleaning? What happened in those 35 days that made it so important to march everyone back into the hall for another SPA session? Let's see, couple of important people died in April and, ah yes, there was a trip to China in early May."

"So, you think all this is connected to the deaths? Or the China trip?"

O snorted. "Who knows? I'm just stringing a pearl necklace to hang on a pig. Put together

everything as if it were all equally relevant. Add a dollop of consistency—‘it’s all related to...’ and then fill in the blank with whatever it is that everyone else is talking about. These days it’s the succession that has you all fixated. Funny, that’s also what you people thought in 1992 and 1993—everything was succession related as far as you were concerned. All wrong. Before that, in the late 1980s, you thought everything that happened up here was tied to the Seoul Olympics. Before that, everything was tied to the annual UNGA debate on the Korean issue.”

“You want a consulting contract?”

“Listen, they could have made any of those personnel changes in April, and most of them without an SPA session. So why hold another one?”

“You’re telling me that you don’t think the succession was an important consideration?”

“I didn’t say that, did I? I said, I don’t know.”

“Ah, now you’re hedging. Good analytical trait. Well, what about Jang’s role in the succession?”

“How do you know Jang has anything to do with the succession?”

“That’s what people say.”

“And how would they know?”

“I guess they know because that’s what people say. Everyone says it.”

“Yes, that’s one way to get at truth I guess, by counting the number of people who pipe up.”

“OK, maybe something else happened at the SPA session that you’re not telling me.”

“What’s the point of having something happen at an SPA meeting and then not telling everyone? The whole point is to make things public. What you should be asking is what happened to make them want to hold another session quick like. I don’t think the economy suddenly went bad between April 7 and May 18, so it must have been something else. Succession? Don’t make me laugh. I’m still betting on the China trip.”

“Or not.”

“That, too.”

III. Nautilus invites your responses

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