

Policy Forum 10-037: The North Korean Worker's Party Meeting of September 2010: Perpetuation of the Living Leader System or Transformation to the Enshrined Leader System?



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Policy Forum 10-037: July 8th, 2010

By Ruediger Frank

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I. Introduction

Ruediger Frank, Professor of East Asian Economy and Society at the University of Vienna, writes, “the wording of the announcement, formal issues, the short-term problem of creating legitimacy for a yet widely unknown grandson of Kim Il-sung, and a more systematic long-term analytical perspective suggest that the Party meeting in September will likely not announce a successor for Kim Jong-il, but rather create or upgrade a collective. This might or might not include Kim Jong-un; but it is hard to imagine that such a collective will not be headed by Kim Jong-il.”

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II. Article by Ruediger Frank

-“The North Korean Worker’s Party Meeting of September 2010: Perpetuation of the Living Leader System or Transformation to the Enshrined Leader System?”

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The North Korean official news agency KCNA has announced a Politburo decision dated June 23, 2010 that in “early September” (9 w?l sangsune) of this year, it will hold a conference of Party delegates (tang taep’yojahoe). At least in name, this is not a Party Congress (tang taehoe); the 6th and so far last such congress was held in 1980 (5th Party Congress: 1970, 4th Party Congress: 1961). There have so far been only two such conferences of Party delegates - in 1958, and in 1966. The task of these conferences, which are supposed to take place every five years according to the Party statutes, is to coordinate the work of the Party between congresses. As 44 years have passed since the last conference of delegates and 30 years since the last Party congress, it is difficult to rely on the statutes to understand what the exact meaning the meeting in September will be. But obviously, it is an extraordinary event.

According to KCNA, the task of the delegates will be to elect the highest leading organ (ch’oego chidokigwan) of the Korean Worker’s Party, the ruling Communist Party of North Korea. Note that the announcement was not talking of the highest leading organ of the country; and that it did not mention a single person, but rather a leadership organ. As historical experience tells us, the latter can under certain circumstances be a euphemism for a single person, as was the case up to 1980 when Kim Jong-il was called the “Party Center” (tang chung’ang). However, for the moment it makes much more sense to take the announcement at face value. The Party has not convened any Party Congress since 1980 and even elected Kim Jong-il to the post of Secretary General only by a somewhat unusual process in 1997. Rather than doing so during a Party plenum (the last one was held in 1993), he was endorsed by the Central Committee and the Central Military Committee of the Party. The Korean Worker’s Party which has operated very irregularly at least regarding formal procedures is now, finally, going to improve its functionality as the major power group in North Korean society.

The first reaction by observers has been to regard the delegate’s meeting in September as the moment when Kim Jong-il’s son Kim Jong-un (Kim Jong-?n) will be officially introduced as successor. Yet, while this is not entirely impossible, it does not necessarily seem to be the most likely outcome. Formally, if we look at the pattern of Kim Jong-il’s elevation to heir, the actual announcement of a

successor (if there is one) would be the task of the 7th Party congress.

Another argument speaking against a formal announcement at this moment is the absence of any achievement of Kim Jong-un that can be convincingly presented to the people and to the elite in order to accept him as the new leader. Although North Korea is routinely described as a Communist dynasty by outsiders, being a relative of the leader does not seem to be a sufficient condition for succession. Kim Jong-il had to prove himself for many years before his father, the elite and the people. Only then was it considered safe to present him as the next leader. If Kim Jong-un is indeed involved in the meeting in September, he will most likely at first become the member of a team and as such become more visible. He can start building a reputation and an image, before in a next step he would possibly rise to the top.

If we look at North Korea from a more systemic and long-term point of view, another outcome of the Party meeting, or at least another interpretation thereof, emerges.

North Korea has for decades been a totalitarian system. One problem with totalitarianism is that it is very costly to maintain, as coercion is the main means of ensuring complacency; and guarding the guardians not only adds additional costs but also creates a typical principal-agent dilemma. Most importantly, a totalitarian system stands and falls with the top leader. It is technically impossible, even oxymoronic, to be ruled by one extraordinary leader after another; being truly extraordinary means being unique. This is why Kim Jong-il never really tried to replace his father; he rather opted for being his only true prophet, the caretaker who carries on the work of Kim Il-sung. He always did so in the name of the super-leader, because “Thou shalt have no other gods before Me”.

North Korea now faces the challenge of converting, or transforming, its totalitarian system into a more sustainable authoritarian one. As such, it would allow limited political pluralism; base its legitimacy not on an all-encompassing “world view” but rather on specific values and mentalities such as patriotism, nationalism, modernization; and it would use extensive or intensive mobilization only occasionally, and not continuously (Merkel 1999: 36). Under such conditions, establishing a relative as successor would be an option, but not a necessity anymore.

Obviously, North Korea still has a long way to go on that road. Once taken, it would bring North Korea closer to the former socialist regimes of Central and Eastern Europe that were, in particular towards the end of their existence, much more authoritarian than totalitarian. Regional examples include China, for which it could be discussed whether it ever fulfilled all criteria for being totalitarian even under Mao. And we should not forget about South Korea, which had seen its much noted modernization under the authoritarian regimes of Park Chung-hee (1961-1979) and Chun Doo-hwan (1980-1987), before it embarked on a peaceful transition to a guided/managed democracy.

However, authoritarian systems have one weakness if compared to totalitarian systems and to democracies. Totalitarianism does not allow contestation; democracy internalizes it. Authoritarian regimes allow contestation but do not incorporate it into the system. This has long-term destructive effects for authoritarian regimes. Limited contestation was granted in countries of “participatory socialism” like East Germany. I use this term to describe socialist systems in which the leadership allows for a conditionality of respect and obedience based on its performance (Duckitt 1989: 71-72). The leadership declares interests and values that it then claims to protect; often, it even identifies the proper means of doing so. Such indoctrination can backfire if the regime is caught red-handed, i.e. violating its own widely publicized and meticulously studied principles. Many people including the elite in the socialist countries of Europe were disappointed with the regime not because of a general disagreement with Marxism-Leninism, but because of the leadership’s proven inability to follow its own principles and deliver the promised results. In North Korea, leadership is as yet mostly unconditional. The guiding *chuch’e* ideology is remarkably unspecific.

As Brachet-Marquez (2010) noted, the acceptance of limited contestation made no difference regarding the nature of authoritarianism. Yet, this had another effect. It laid the basis for the social movements at the micro and the macro level that in the end brought those systems down. North Korea until very recently avoided even the most limited political and economic contestation (no alternatives to the one-Party system and to state ownership in the economy) and hence as a system enjoyed high stability, at the cost of ever lower efficiency. The latter became so problematic that it threatened the regime's existence. The leadership reacted. With the introduction of market elements including the monetization of the economy, the North Korean government in essence allowed, for the first time in decades, limited contestation and instantly was faced with the same results that can be observed in all authoritarian regimes: once they were allowed to taste it, the people wanted more. Hence the reform was stopped, and in particular in terms of domestic economic policies, North Korea attempted to return to its own orthodox positions of the 1960s. Yet this is futile, as the systemic problems do not go away and reform pressure rises.

Regime survival is, as most analysts agree, the major objective of the leadership in Pyongyang. To avoid an implosion and to ensure regime survival, the transformation of a totalitarian into an authoritarian regime seems inevitable. An important step in this ongoing process would be the replacement of the "living Great Leader system" by an "enshrined Great Leader system" which is ruled by a collective of people who are essentially top administrators from the various power groups of society. This collective - the National Defense Commission, or a resuscitated Politburo, or a newly created Council for National Unification - will have to have a leader. However, he will be more like a *primus inter pares*, not a divine but an "ordinary" leader like the Pope in the Catholic Church. Inspiration, vision and legitimacy will be derived from the eternal leader Kim Il-sung and his only true prophet Kim Jong-il. Both have left so many often contradictory and ambiguous statements that in fact any policy would be possible based on their legacy. It is hence relatively open in which direction the country will move after this power transition is concluded.

In conclusion, I would argue that the wording of the announcement, formal issues, the short-term problem of creating legitimacy for a yet widely unknown grandson of Kim Il-sung, and a more systematic long-term analytical perspective suggest that the Party meeting in September will likely not announce a successor for Kim Jong-il, but rather create or upgrade a collective. This might or might not include Kim Jong-un; but it is hard to imagine that such a collective will not be headed by Kim Jong-il. This will be an important and long overdue step towards the perpetuation of political leadership in North Korea, and on the way toward transforming a static totalitarian system into a more flexible authoritarian one.

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IV. Nautilus invites your responses

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