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Has the Next Great Leader of North Korea Been Announced? [Japanese Translation Available]

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Why it makes sense to read North Korean media

Something big may be going on in North Korea. In early October, the official North Korean media may have started to reveal who will be the next leader of their country after the family dynasty ends. But they have not yet done so directly. Therefore, some contextualization is needed before arriving at still speculative conclusions.

Socialist societies with ideology-based political systems, such as North Korea, are known to treat 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 structure, the top leadership is responsible for the slightest detail. So every failure is seen as the leadership's responsibility, 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 one of the weaknesses of the system. Politically aware people in state socialist countries tend to read official publications much more carefully than their compatriots in liberal democracies. Often, they discover messages that the leadership prefers not be publicly unveiled. While the state-controlled media may not provide information on many issues, we can be sure that it reflects the leadership's point of view, since it is their job to communicate this position to the population. Even in an ideology-based society, including one in which a powerful dictatorship rules, leaders have to justify what they do. Important measures have to be prepared, as was the case with the July 2002 economic adjustments.

It is difficult to imagine that the question of leadership after Kim Jong-il would not be prepared carefully 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 were to be an announcement of a new leader, careful readers of the Rodong Sinmun would in all likelihood know it in advance because the North Korean people need to be prepared to ensure their acceptance.

I have argued since 2004 that the succession by a third Great Leader is very unlikely and that we should expect a form of collective leadership headed by a figure who 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 enable 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. Not only has he failed to clearly designate one of them as a successor, but their position as grandsons of the Great Leader might be too weak to ensure the strong control that will be needed to hold the country together in difficult times. In order to prevent things from getting out of control, change must appear to be 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? No announcement such as "Successor of Chairman Kim Jong-il Chosen". But what about this: "Monument to Party Founding Draws Endless Crowd of Visitors". This might be just another form of dull report on events that nobody cares about except the editors and their bosses. But it also might be the missing hint that we seek. 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 to specific soldiers and battles). 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 and still before the announcement of the Military First Policy (Seongun).

The monument to the Party Founding

It is conspicuous to read about a total of 4.2 million domestic and 200,000 overseas visitors, as well as a daily average of 2,000 military servicepersons to the monument. Bowing down in front of a monument is a universal gesture of obedience. To highlight the point, the article explains that all 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 Military First Politics). 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 that the Juche idea, preserved by the Party, the mother of all North Korean people, will remain forever while leadership may change.

If we carry Kremlinology to extremes, we could argue that Juche dominates Seongun, that the military subordinates itself to 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 centered on the party, and that continuity is the key to stability.

Past Coverage of Party Foundation Day

October 10th marks the Party's foundation, so such reporting could simply be standard self-praise on the occasion of an anniversary. A look at the related reporting in 2000-2007, however, reveals nothing similar. On the contrary; this is the first time that a party foundation anniversary has been celebrated with coverage of visits at the 1995 monument. We also notice an interesting change in the tone of related articles, as the following brief analysis demonstrates.

In 2000, the emphasis in Rodong Sinmun reporting around October 10th was on reunification and Kim Il-sung's proposal for the Democratic Federal Republic of Goryeo that would join North and South. 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" appeared on Oct. 9th, providing contrast to praise for the "invincible" Party the following day. 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 James Kelly's visit to Pyongyang and just before his statement that marked the beginning of the second nuclear crisis, an article describing the Party's rosy future made clear that military affairs had to be placed above all else.

In 2003, Rodong Sinmun pointed to the 6th anniversary of Kim Jong-il's assumption of the Party leadership. Again, the People's Army was stressed as the core and main force of the Party. In 2004, no mention was made 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 refusal to bow to any outside pressure including sanctions was the sure path to victory in all fields. In 2005, the Rodong Sinmun went one step further, arguing that the Party had made great contributions beyond its own country, to the global cause of human independence by putting forward Seongun. On its 60th anniversary in 2006, the Party was again presented 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 the Century", identified as Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il. On Oct. 8th, the "40-odd year history" of Kim Jong-il's leadership of the Party was celebrated in an editorial, partly explaining why his election to Secretary General had not been mentioned anymore, but also leaving readers to wonder how it was possible to claim four decades of Party leadership (the term "party center" or dangjungang, understood as an euphemism for Kim Jong-il, had emerged only in the 1970s). Seongun was not mentioned; the next day, however, Rodong Sinmun reported the country's first nuclear test, which was followed by a new year's editorial in January 2007 that emphasized economic construction now that the defense issue had been settled by becoming a nuclear power.

North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il (C), accompanied by Kim Yong-Chun (L), chief of North Korea's People's Army General Staff, Jo Myong-Rok (2nd L), the army's General Political Department director, the Supreme People's Assembly President Kim Yong-Nam (2nd R) and North Korean Premier Pak Pong-Ju (R) attending celebrations marking the 60th anniversary of the Workers' Party of Korea at the May Day Stadium in Pyongyang, 2005.

In October 2007, an article praised the People's Army, recalling a banquet speech of Kim Il-sung as far back as 1947 as if there were no more appropriate reason 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 was 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; in other words, disloyalty to the Party would mean disloyalty to Kim Il-sung. The single-minded unity of party, leader and people was called for.

Kim Il-sung on horseback carrying a young Kim Jong-il on Mt. Paekdu

Mother Party, the Next Great Leader

As shown, the Monument to the Party's foundation was not 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 space by reporting a politically correct, but insignificant 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, though events could also force an acceleration of the pace. Recall that this congress 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.

Ruediger Frank is Professor of East Asian Economy and Society, Vice Director, East Asian Institute, University of Vienna and a Japan Focus associate. He wrote this article for Japan Focus. Posted October 22, 2008. ruediger.frank@univie.ac.at

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