

The 3rd Session of the 12th Supreme People's Assembly: Analysis and Outlook

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At the 3rd Session of the 12th Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) held on June 7th, major personnel reshufflings were implemented in the Cabinet, including appointing Choi Young Rim as the new Premier. Further, Jang Sung Taek was promoted from member to Vice Chairman of the National Defense Commission (NDC). This overturns the predictions of a hard-line declaration in response to the Cheonan incident and offers circumstantial evidence that NDC Chairman Kim Jong Il is focused on domestic politics.

The main features of this personnel change are that they have chosen a very conservative and safe direction, as can be seen by Choi Young Rim's appointment as Premier, and that they are concentrating on establishing a secure succession system, as can be seen by the rise of Jang Sung Taek, "Kim Jong Un's custodian," to the position of NDC Vice Chairman.

The NDC reorganization which has garnered so much attention stopped at the promotion of Jang Sung Taek, and did not extend to an election of new NDC members. Jang was already 2nd-in-command for practical purposes, and as he has risen to the rank of Vice Chairman just 14 months after becoming an NDC member in April of last year at the 1st Session of the 12th SPA, this promotion further cements his status. It appears that he was promoted in reward for not showing "ambition" and for quietly managing the country's affairs after Kim Jong Il was stricken by a serious illness in August 2008. It is common knowledge that those who display "ambition" can never gain Kim Jong Il's trust. With Jang's promotion, there appear to be four Vice Premiers largely taking over the role of inactive 1st Vice Chairman Jo Myong Rok; the other three are Kim Young Chun, Yi Yong Mu, and Oh Kuk Ryol. Jang, who also heads the executive branch of the Party, is responsible for governing the party leadership of the National Security Agency, the People's Security Agency, the police, and the courts with the additional role of Vice Chairman of the NDC – the highest organ of state power in North Korea – he has obtained a position of unrivaled power.

Recently, with the deaths of Party Organization and Guidance Department Senior Deputy Directors Ri Yong Chol and Ri Jeh Gang, there is no individual or faction with power to match that of Jang Sung Taek, so for the time being the role of the “2nd-In-Command” will be more dominant than ever. Jang will also likely act as a conduit linking the Party and the NDC. It is worth noting that Jang’s wife Kim Kyung Hui, director of the light industry division of the Party, who appeared publicly in June 2009 for the first time in 6 years, continued to attend field guidance trips alongside Kim Jong Il again this year. This demonstrates that, between the two of them, this couple dominates the Korean Workers’ Party for all practical purposes, dividing their roles into light industry (Kim Kyung Hui) and public security and personnel (Jang Sung Taek). Raising the status of Jang Sung Taek and Kim Kyung Hui lays the groundwork for getting control of the alienated public sentiment following the currency reform and establishing a secure power succession.

It is said that since financial chaos erupted following the currency reform last year, Kim Kyung Hui has traveled the country assessing public sentiment and censoring local officials. Because of this, some have suggested that Kim Kyung Hui’s influence can be seen in Pak Nam Gi’s execution as well as this cabinet reorganization.

Intended successor Kim Jong Eun’s role is still unclear, though it is known that he works in the NDC, North Korea’s most powerful body, in addition to being a rising official deeply involved in policy decisions. But it is plain that Kim Kyung Hui and Jang Sung Taek have been charged with the important roles of “custodians” to Kim Jong Eun in securing his succession. Ultimately, this year’s Party personnel changes, the Cabinet reorganization, and Jang Sung Taek’s promotion to NDC Vice Chairman all are believed to support the stability of the succession system. The key questions now are: when will Kim Jong Eun become an NDC member, and at what point will he be named 1st Vice Chairman of the NDC. The fact that the “recall” of Kim Young Il was proposed by the Political Bureau of the Party Central Committee suggests that the status of the Central Committee has risen and raises questions about Kim Jong Eun’s position within the Party.

This cabinet reorganization is seen as a supplement to the personnel changes carried out among KWP officials from late last year to early this year. These replaced key personnel in the Financial Planning Department, the Finance and Accounting Department, and Office 39, which form the core economic divisions of the Party, and also named Deputy Foreign Minister Kim Young Il to the vacant seat of Director of the International Affairs Department. Also they appointed many people to party positions at the section chief and deputy director levels, including some seats that had been vacant – for instance, naming former Minister of Trade Ri Kwang Geun as Deputy Director of the



KWP’s Unification Front Department.

NDC Chairman Kim Jong Il was not present at the last SPA session, on April 9th, but he did appear at this most recent session, held just 2 months later. But there does not appear to have been any discussion on appointing successor Kim Jong Eun to an official post, taking action in response to the Cheonan situation, introducing supplemental legislation following up on Chairman Kim’s China visit, or revising the Constitution. According to a statement from North Korea, this 3rd Session dealt solely with personnel reshuffling and organizational issues.

The most conspicuous changes to the Cabinet were the appointment of the new premier and a significant reinforcement of deputy premiers. They “recalled” Premier Kim Young Il, holding him responsible for the disorder following last year’s currency reform, and appointed in his stead Pyongyang City Party Secretary Choi Young Rim. Also Vice Premiers Kwak Bum Gi, O Su Yong, and Pak Myong Son were “recalled,” and Kang Neung Soo, a KWP culture minister in charge of movies, Kim Rak Hee, a party secretary in South Hwanghae Province, Ri Tae Nam, a party secretary from South Pyongan Province, and Jeon Ha Chol, a former politburo member, were appointed as new vice premiers. Minister of Machinery Production Cho Byong Joo and Minister of the Electronics Industry Han Kwang Bok were also appointed as vice premiers. 2 of the 5 vice ministers from the previous Cabinet kept their posts: Roh Du Chol and Pak Su Gil. Thus the total number of vice ministers rose from 5 to 8. In addition, Ahn Jeong Su was appointed Minister of Joint Ventures, Jo Young Chol, Director of Foodstuffs and Daily Necessities Industry, was appointed Minister of Foodstuffs and Daily Necessities Industry, and NDC member Pak Myeong Chol was appointed Chairman of the Physical Culture and Sports Guidance Commission. Meanwhile, Ri Ju Oh, Minister of Light Industry, Jeong Yeon Gwa, Minister of Foodstuffs and Daily Necessities Industry, and Pak Hak Sun, Chairman of the Physical Culture and Sports Guidance Commission, were all dismissed from their posts.

In this Cabinet reshuffling, it is noteworthy that Choi Young Rim and Jeon Ha Chol, both former secretaries in President Kim Il Sung’s office (the Keumsusan Assembly Hall), were appointed as premier and vice premier respectively, and that Ri Tae Nam and Kim Rak Hee, members of a clique of party secretaries, were appointed vice premiers. This suggests an increased role for the Cabinet in reconstructing the economy and an intention to correctly interpret and deal with the chaotic public sentiment in the provinces. The emphasis on economic construction suggests a desire to put the focus on Kim Il Sung’s final dying injunctions. In particular, looking at the Cabinet reorganization alone, the changes seem to suggest a strong tendency to attempt to revive the planned economy



based on a path of ‘self-resurrection’ rather than ‘reform and opening.’

In a “6.25 Conversation” released in June 2009, Chairman Kim Jung Il emphatically stated, “All the people must fully employ their spirit of hardship, struggle, and self-resurrection in a new mighty upsurge to achieve a strong and prosperous nation,” adding, “Our strength is the mightiest, our own self-resurrection is the best way.” The core idea of this speech is that North Korea must normalize its planned economy while adhering to the path of self-resurrection. This policy direction is reflected in the recent cabinet reorganization.

The resignation of Vice Premiers Kwak Bum Gi and O Su Yong and the promotion of Cho Byong Joo and Han Kwang Bok represent signs of generational transition. Recently Chairman Kim Jong Il has embarked on frequent field guidance excursions in what appears to be way of rewarding achievements in the much-emphasized machine and electronics industries. Thus the 2010 Cabinet reorganization can be considered an attempt to deploy proven elder officials in all areas in order to achieve the 2010 economic goals, while also shifting in some new generation officials in a few high-level posts.

However, the North Korean economic system will continue as before, and since the fruits of China-North Korea cooperation will take some time to be realized, there is still no way of knowing how successful the new Cabinet under the leadership of Premier Choi Young Rim will be in revitalizing the economy. The measures for attracting foreign investment which have been enacted under the leadership of the NDC, such as creating a National Development Bank, also have not yielded any significant results as yet. Considering these factors, the question of whether this new Cabinet will turn out to be a ‘transitional cabinet’ or a long-lasting arrangement will depend on how well they can resolve the economic problems and improve relations with China and South Korea.

