

## Revisiting the Party Delegates' Conference in 2010: A Self-Celebration of the Rise of a New Power Coalition

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A year has passed since the North Korean Party Delegates' Conference was held in September 2010. In the meantime time we have seen various analyses of the conference's significance. In a departure from existing analyses, this paper assesses the conference as a self-congratulatory celebration honoring the rise of a new coalition of ruling elites in North Korea. The previous power coalition, which had led North Korea since the establishment of the *songun* (military-first) political system in 1995, was dominated by leading members of the (old) military. The old military clique had been gradually diminishing in stature since 2005, so that by June 2010 most of the leading members of this group had exited from the political stage. In their place, from 2005 on a new power coalition began to array itself in key positions. After Kim Jong Il suffered a stroke in August 2008, a series of measures were adopted in February 2009 which had a particularly dramatic effect in shifting the existing power balance between the old and the new. Additional members of the older clique were pushed out until June 2010, and then the new power coalition announced plans to hold a Party Delegates' Conference the following September to celebrate its domination of North Korean politics.

To understand what this means in concrete terms we must

first make a brief review of the evolution of the North Korean politics since 1995. The *songun* system, which was dominated by elite members of the military, was introduced in 1995 and fully consolidated as a ruling system in 1998. That year, Kim Jong Il rose to the position of General Secretary of the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) and his position as chairman of the National Defense Commission (NDC) was given new power via a constitutional revision. The regime used a series of purges of the late 1990s such as the Shimhwajo incident as a pretext to eliminate certain influential members of the Central Party and then began experimenting with economic reforms around 2000. With the firm establishment of the military-centered coalition, Lee Jeh Gang was named first vice director of the KWP's Organization and Guidance Department in July 2001; interestingly, sometime the following year Ko Young Hee (mother of Kim Jong Eun) began to receive the moniker "the Great Mother." This indicates that members of the military power elite at the time were already interested in shaping the succession as hereditary power transfer and had decided to take preparatory action to settle the issue. The July 2002 reform measures resulted in more contraction of the Party organs.

However, beginning in 2005 the military-centric power coalition came under attack from within. The reform policy was assailed by conservative elements in the Central Party. Jang Sung Taek, who had been purged in 2004, re-emerged as first vice chairman of the Party Central Committee in January 2006. Pro-reform Prime Minister Park Bong Ju was dismissed in April 2007. From May onward the reformist phenomena, which had been widespread and flourishing, came under attack on all fronts through intensified inspections and various other measures. Amid this retrogressive vortex, in October 2007 the second inter-Korean summit was held. This summit appears to have been the product of an effort led by Jang Sung Taek, a leading figure of the newly emerging power elite. Jang advanced to become vice director of the Administrative Department at the Party Central Committee in charge of security and judiciary organizations in December 2007. From 2008 onward North Korea further intensified anti-market policies, while declaring that by 2012 they would transform the country into a *kangsongdaeguk* ("strong and prosperous nation"). It appears that the (old) military coalition also lost the initiative in the planning of the Kim Jong Eun succession, assumed to have started sometime around 2007. Finally in 2008, as President Lee Myung Bak took office in South Korea, the (new) military began to emerge at the forefront of North Korea's policy toward the South.

From August to October of 2008 Kim Jong Il stepped back from his leadership role as he recovered from a stroke. After he returned to managing government affairs,

the reorganization of the power structure resumed at an accelerated pace from early 2009 onward. From January 2009 work began in earnest to raise Kim Jong Eun's stature as the designated successor in all areas. Over a two month period from February to April 2009, a series of measures were taken to adjust and re-organize the dominions controlled by the new and old military factions respectively. Key leaders of the new military faction advanced rapidly during this period. Lee Young Ho, who had held successive posts in the Pyongyang Defense Command since September 2003, was made chief of the Korean People's Army (KPA) General Staff in February 2009 and promoted from three-star to four-star general. Sometime between February and April of 2009 the KWP's Office 35 and the Operations Bureau were combined with the Reconnaissance Bureau of the People's Armed Forces Ministry to create a new entity under the Armed Forces Ministry known as the General Reconnaissance Bureau, and some unknown time later General Kim Young Chul was named its director. Meanwhile the core leaders of the old military faction were effectively retired. With the exception of Oh Kuk Ryol most of these retreating leaders had risen to importance after the *songun* system began to be established in 1995. Oh Kuk Ryol, who had been director of the Operations Bureau since July 1989, was promoted to NDC vice chairman in February 2009. That same month Kim Young Chun, who had been chief of General Staff since October 1995, was promoted to minister of the People's Armed Forces Ministry. However, while these two individuals technically rose to positions of higher prestige, in reality they surrendered their capacity to wield real power. In other words they each received an honorary discharge from power. Kim Il Chul did not even merit the consideration of such an honorable dismissal. He had been minister of the People's Armed Forces since September 2000 and suffered the indignity of being demoted to 1st vice minister in February 2009. With these power restructuring moves the real power of the North Korean military was transferred to Chief of General Staff Lee Young Ho and General Political Bureau First Deputy Director Kim Jong Gak. Kim Jong Gak was named first deputy director of the General Political Bureau in March 2007, and considering that Director Jo Myong Rok's declining health forced him to cease handling the Bureau's daily operations from 2007 onward (Jo Myong Rok was named director of the General Political Bureau in October 1995 and 1st vice chairman of the NDC in September 1998), it is fair to say that Kim Jong Gak had already been managing the business of the Bureau in practice from 2007 onward.

Following up on the changes of early 2009, in the first half of 2010 the remaining leaders of the old military faction disappeared from the government. On April 26th it was announced that Lee Yong Chol, first vice director of the Party's Organization and Guidance Department, had died of a heart attack. Lee had been appointed first

deputy director in 1994 and had managed military affairs for the Party for 16 years. Kim Il Chol, the first vice minister of the Armed Forces Ministry and an NDC member, was dismissed from duty on May 13 with a perfunctory announcement that dropped even the basic honorific title “comrade” from his name. Lee Jeh Gang, who had been another first vice director of the Organization and Guidance Department since July 2001, reportedly died in a car accident on June 2nd. Jo Myong Rok, director of the General Political Bureau and first vice chairman of the NDC, had already been effectively out of power due to poor health since 2007, and on November 6th it was announced that he had died of heart disease. Thus the downfall of the key leaders of the *songun* era was complete.

Meanwhile, an irregular session of the Supreme People’s Committee in June 2010 made Jang Sung Taek an NDC vice chairman. On June 29th 2010 an announcement was made, in the name of the Central Party Political Bureau, that a Party Delegates’ Conference would be held in early September. This announcement itself was well-timed. The aforementioned elimination of the old military faction was completed by about the end of June 2010, and Jang Sung Taek, a core member of the new power elite, had just been promoted to NDC vice chairman. Thus it seems the conference was intended as a kind of celebratory event and unifying rally for the purpose of formally proclaiming the emergence of a new coalition of power elites and expanding its array of forces. The event was originally scheduled to take place in early September but was later pushed back to September 28th. At the conference Kim Jong Eun was given a seat on the Party Central Military Committee as a vice chairman. Also, various Central Party organs that had long lain dormant were restored, and several vacant cabinet positions were filled by senior cadres.

In 2011 noteworthy purges of key individuals continued. Ryu Kyong and Ju Sang Sung were representative examples. Sometime in January Ryu Kyong was purged on charges of leaking secret information during inter-Korean talks for a leadership summit. Ryu Kyong’s removal was probably closely connected with Kim Jong Eun’s takeover of the State Security Agency (SSA). Not only Ryu himself but also various personnel closely associated with him were eliminated in a large-scale purge. We can speculate that, in the process of taking control of the SSA, Kim Jong Eun needed to free up some official posts to bestow on his loyal supporters. Ju Sang Sung’s removal also appears to have been instigated by Kim Jong Eun. Ju was appointed to the People’s Security Agency in July 2004 and discharged on March 16th 2011. He was originally promoted on the recommendations of Lee Jeh Gang and Lee Yong Chol. Later as Jang Sung Taek’s star rose he aligned himself more closely with Jang. Thus it seems probable that Kim Jong Eun ordered his dismissal in order to restrain

the influence of Jang Sung Taek. NDC Administration Department Director Lee Myong Su took his place as head of People's Security on April 7th. In the past Lee was one of the officials who most frequently accompanied Kim Jong Il on on-site inspection tours. In other words one of Kim Jong Il's close confidants was picked as the new head of People's Security.

In sum, the September 2010 Party Delegates' Conference was a self-congratulatory event and an occasion to formally introduce a new ruling political coalition to the domestic and external audiences. This coalition displaced the previous ruling group centered around the old military elites, which had led the country since about 1995. The new power coalition is built upon four pillars: Kim Jong Il + Kim Jong Eun + Jang Sung Taek and associated civilian cadres + the new military elites. Each pillar has its own areas of responsibility and corresponding interests. The overall policy direction is <possessing nuclear weapons + opening up to earn foreign currency + resisting internal reform>. At the present moment of September 2011, the new power coalition has been successfully consolidated in positions of power, the country's nuclear capabilities have been expanded, and the regime has also displayed its ability to threaten its neighbors through acts of belligerence. In the effort to earn foreign currency they have had some success with mineral exports. However they have yet to achieve clear results in the various other sectors they are pursuing. The biggest problem for the new coalition is their anti-reform policy. Kim Jong Eun has taken particular responsibility for the crackdown on 'anti-socialist phenomena' after the September Party Delegates' Conference. Internal control measures are growing more forceful day by day, yet paradoxically this casts doubt on the effectiveness of such control measures. Ultimately these control measures will pose a dilemma for Kim Jong Eun, and they are not likely to be seen as a positive factor in building his reputation as a leader.