



Arising From “the People”: Bottom Up Change in North Korean Society

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This article provides an overview of North Korea’s social and cultural changes in 2020 based on the “people-first principle” that the regime advocates. This article views “the people” as the leading agents of social change in North Korea, and looks at “bottom-up” changes through several key examples. Policies have changed from a “top-down” approach in which the State leads the change. State-led efforts like construction and modernization of infrastructure, mobilization and control of the people, and civilizing efforts are still ongoing. However, the direction and the main agent of policy change are gradually shifting from the State to the people. The North Korean regime has recognized this change among the people and started to reflect such change in its policies. In this article, the process of such change is explained as a “bottom-up” approach.

First, a new change is emerging in the new generation of young people. During the 2019 Lunar New Year celebration, a new format of performance began to appear in the form of large-scale outdoor concerts. After this, performances at major events in North Korea gradually moved from indoors to outdoors. The regime has been building a series of youth open-air theaters in accordance with the shift to outdoor performances which began in 2019. Last year alone, active construction took place on Pyongyang Youth Park Open-air Theater in January, Pyongannam-do Youth Open-air Theater in October, Hwangbuk Sariwon Youth Open-air Theater in November, and Sinuiju Youth Open-air Theater in Pyongbuk. That is, the outdoor performance format was adopted in North Korea due to changes in the tastes and cultural consumption patterns of young people, who favor performances like large-scale concerts.

It is also noteworthy that while the North Korean regime canceled or downsized most of its

planned celebrations as part of a strict response to COVID-19, celebrations of major anniversaries resumed beginning with the August 28 Youth Day celebration. The Youth Day performance, which has been held indoors in the past, was performed on an outdoor stage for the first time. While it is possible that the Youth Day event was held because the spread of COVID-19 had slowed at the time, it is worth noting that on August 28, the day of the Youth Day celebration, the Rodong Sinmun published an article that emphasized the emergency anti-epidemic drive by stressing the importance of “more intensive anti-epidemic measures” and stating that “the emergency anti-epidemic system must be strictly followed.” The Youth Day performance took place while strict anti-virus measures were in place, and all outdoor audience members were required to wear masks. The fact that the event was held despite the virus situation shows how important the Youth Day event is to the North Korean authorities.

To celebrate Youth Day on August 28, 2020, the Rodong Sinmun published writings from the participants of the 2nd National Meeting of Young Frontrunners in Noble Traits held in May 2015. The articles emphasized the beautiful stories and achievements of these participants and expressed their gratitude to the Party. The articles depicted a desirable image of the exemplary youths and described the “young frontrunners in noble traits” as “the wonderful young people of our time who have noble moral character and do many good things for society and the group.”¹ Kim Jong Un emphasized the youth-first principle² in an appreciation letter delivered to the Youth League organization during the 2nd National Meeting of Young Frontrunners in Noble Traits in 2015. In the letter, he used varying phrases to praise youths including “a young man who moved on from the past and started anew,” “no men are born bad,” “there is no young man who cannot improve,” and “educate young people who are behind.” Through these statements, we can infer that there were signs of ideological disturbance and North Korean youths distancing themselves from the socialist style at that time. Accordingly, the National Meeting of Young Frontrunners in Noble Traits aimed to reinforce ideology and strengthen unity among the youth in the recognition of their role and importance as the next generation. In addition, it had the purpose of suppressing the current atmosphere of ideological disturbance that was prevalent among the youth by extolling the virtues of the young frontrunners in noble traits and presenting these youths as role models.

The youth-first policy advocated by the North Korean authorities indicates that they are

¹ “Shall be a pioneer of the technological breakthrough,” 「Rodong Sinmun」, August 29, 2020.

² North Korea’s Joseonmal Daesajeon(Unabridged Dictionary) defines Youth-first as “Valuing the status and roles of the youth who are the leading players in national defense and socialist construction”, and Youth-first politics as “Politics of the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK) that has firm belief in the youth in revolution and construction from the most accurate understanding of the status and role of young people and implement things based on their strength.”

well aware of the role and the importance of the country's youth as their successors. At the 8th Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), it was suggested that the name "Youth League" be revised during the upcoming Youth League Congress in accordance with the adoption of the decision to amend the Party rules. It is expected that by recognizing today's youth and reflecting their changes, North Korea will focus more on the consciousness and problems of the youth who will lead the Party in the future through renovation under a new name.

Changes led by the people may also appear alongside the COVID-19 induced quarantine measures. Last year, the aftermath of continued international economic sanctions was aggravated by the outbreak of COVID-19 in North Korea. Despite the Party's anti-epidemic drive, the public's adherence to quarantine measures and discipline have weakened. Some people have displayed a "chronic attitude" toward the Party's anti-epidemic drive and "the false behavior of not wearing mask in public."³ The Rodong Sinmun explained that not wearing a mask is "a serious social and political problem of not being able to following one's basic obligation as a member of society and can be seen as a sin against the state."⁴ The Rodong Sinmun also criticized "a phenomenon [that] arose where some citizens, seeing wearing masks as burdensome, held fast to their opinion against those who require them to abide by the quarantine regulations...Officials of certain units organized worker meetings without wearing masks or some did not appropriately respond to the demands made by members of relevant institutions that are acquainted with the state of the quarantine work"⁵ as the product of selfish thinking.

The North Korean regime regarded these problems as a failure to recognize the severity of COVID-19, and pointed out "chronological, mechanical, and practical treatment"⁶ of the emergency anti-epidemic drive as the biggest problem. They further cautioned that "the greatest enemy in overcoming the existing crisis is laxity," stating "arbitrary interpretation and undisciplined behaviors in implementing the code of conduct and norms established in relation to pandemic prevention can jeopardize not only individuals but the country as well."⁷ These statements imply that the control of the leadership has decreased since violations of pandemic measures continue

³ "Let's prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus, by tightening-up quarantine measures," 「Rodong Sinmun」, February 16, 2020.

⁴ "Everyone must wear masks completely", "Never slow down the tightening-up," 「Rodong Sinmun」, February 22, 2020.

⁵ Sung-min Kim, "Great national project for the People's security," 「Rodong Sinmun」, March 9, 2020.

⁶ "Infinite responsibility, loyalty, and dedication must be accompanied in making the decision in the Party Central Committee's emergency enlarged Meeting of the Political Bureau," 「Rodong Sinmun」, July 30, 2020.

⁷ "Top-class alert and strict compliance required under the maximum emergency system," 「Rodong Sinmun」, August 4, 2020.

despite the State's emphasis on strict quarantine.⁸ Such lack of discipline has been viewed as a "non-socialist" phenomenon. North Korea's Unabridged Dictionary defines "non-socialism" as "all kinds of unsound things that violate the socialist principle. If non-socialism is promoted, socialism cannot be advocated for, and the superiority of North Korean socialism prioritizing the people cannot be developed."⁹ "Non-socialist" behaviors, which existed in North Korea prior to the pandemic, have increased as COVID-19 persists and have become the target of regime criticism.

The non-socialist phenomenon has become an internal problem in North Korea. Kim Jong Un's New Year's address on January 1, 2018 mentioned the non-socialist phenomenon in the passage "A vigorous struggle should be waged to tighten moral discipline throughout society, establish a socialist way of life, and eliminate all kinds of non-socialist practices so as to ensure that all the people, possessed of ennobling mental and moral traits, lead a revolutionary and cultured life."¹⁰ On July 20, 2020, the Korean Central News Agency reported that when Kim Jong Un inspected the construction site of Pyongyang General Hospital, he instructed the officers in charge to replace all of the construction directors because they had burdened the people when securing equipment and materials.¹¹ In the 20th expanded Meeting of the Political Bureau of the 7th Central Committee of the WPK held on November 15, 2020, Kim also criticized the relevant departments of the Party Central Committee, judicial prosecutors, and security agencies as irresponsible, citing their extreme negligence of duties as the reason for the appearance of non-socialist behaviors in educational institutions such as Pyongyang Medical University and society as a whole.¹² Likewise, the prolonged quarantine measures have led people to neglect their duties and fostered a lack of discipline within society. The North Korean regime continues to criticize this behavior and highlight the boundaries of ideological disturbance.

COVID-19 has placed the North Korean people under strict quarantine measures and control of the authorities in the context of economic sanctions. The North Korean people experienced increasing disaster fatigue following their mobilization in flood restoration along with the 80-day battle to prepare for the 8th Party Congress. The North Korean authorities responded accordingly. During the commemorative speech at the military parade celebrating the 75th anniversary of the founding of the WPK, Kim Jong Un said in tears that "our service personnel

⁸ Seungjun Oh and Seunghee Ha, "North Korea's Response to COVID-19: Focusing on the Rodong Sinmun," 『NORTH KOREAN STUDIES REVIEW』, 24.2(2020): p. 33.

⁹ North Korea's Joseonmal Daesajeon(Unabridged Dictionary)

¹⁰ "New Year's Address," 『Rodong Sinmun』, January 1, 2018.

¹¹ Korean Central News Agency, July 20, 2020.

¹² "The 7th Central Committee of the Worker's Party of Korea (WPK) held the 20th enlarged Meeting of the Political Bureau," 『Rodong Sinmun』, November 16, 2020.

performed devotedly on the anti-epidemic front and the front of removing the aftereffects of natural disasters which we unexpectedly had to face this year. No one would approach their patriotic and heroic devotion without shedding tears of gratitude...I feel deep regret for them, and I feel pain in my heart as they are not all here on this glorious night with us...I thought over what I would say first at this moment, when we will be looking back upon every page of our Party's 75-year history filled with glory, I have only one sincere, heartfelt word: thanks." Kim's tears and direct expression of gratitude can be interpreted as intending to give the public credit for overcoming difficulties and raise their loyalty by conveying emotional messages.

The 75th anniversary of the founding of the WPK was celebrated with new types of events. These events included a "lighting festival" using light, a "military parade music concert" held by the State Council's performance group, and a comedy performance show, "Our House Full of Laughter." "Our House Full of Laughter" was performed at the Youth Park Open-air Theater from October 7th to 16th. The performance consisted of narration props, gags, animal performances, sand paintings, and fantasy magic. Previously, North Korea established the National Comedy Company in 1994 under the direction of Kim Jong Il in order to overcome the Arduous March. The Company was disbanded at the end of the famine as its role was finished. The exceptional comedy performance included in the celebration of the 75th founding anniversary of the Party had a similar purpose to the National Comedy Company established by Kim Jong Il to overcome the Arduous March in 1994 of defeating difficulties through laughter. North Korea used laughter to overcome the Arduous March in 1994, and similarly, "Our House Full of Laughter" is intended to console the exhausted public that has suffered the continuing hardships of sanctions, COVID-19, and natural disasters with laughter. In other words, we can infer from the way that a comedy performance group was established to appease public sentiment using laughter that North Korea's current situation is comparable to the suffering of the Arduous March.

In sum, North Korea is reacting passively in order to satisfy people's tastes and desires as "bottom-up" changes transform the new generation's consciousness. People are now directly expressing their opinions on the external environment and domestic issues. In the Kim Jong Un period, new national symbols have been redefined overall, and the old factors that were in line with the previous globalization standards are undergoing a process of reorganization with the current globalization standards. This can be seen as a process of making a "universal state" comparable to the international community. The "people-first principle" stipulated as a basic political means at the 8th Party Congress suggests that the power that has been concentrated in the state has begun to shift to the people as a result of the system changes made in response to the environment of the times.

The “people-first principle” exists as a slogan of strategic governance for loyalty to the State and patriotism for the people. Nevertheless, it can be interpreted that the reason behind the emergence of such strategic slogans is that it is impossible for the State to exist solely with authority without appealing to the people. We can learn more about North Korea and its current transition by focusing on the people-led social and cultural changes. ■

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