KIM JONG-IL MAKES IT OFFICIAL: HAS GODOT ARRIVED AT LAST?

*by Aidan Foster-Carter**

Long-Awaited Development

Three years and more after the death of Kim Il-sung, waiting for Kim Jong-il to officially succeed his late father had begun to seem like waiting for Godot. Unlike in Samuel Beckett's famous play, however, in Pyongyang Godot finally showed up. On October 8, it was announced that Kim Jong-il had been appointed general secretary of the ruling Korean Workers Party (KWP). The aim of this article is to comment on what this change may mean for North Korea, mainly at home but also externally.

Actually Godot has only half-arrived, and the way he did so was unorthodox. As of late October there was still no word on when, or even whether, Kim Jong-il will take on the other vacant post, that of state president. On this there are only rumours. September 9 next year would be an auspicious date, since it is North Korea's 50th birthday as a state. Alternatively, the presidency might become a figurehead and be given to someone who enjoys meeting foreigners more than Kim Jong-il seems to. Foreign minister Kim Yong-nam would be an obvious choice.

Meanwhile North Korea remains officially headless; and those hard-working octogenarians, vice-presidents Ri Jong-ok (81) and Pak Song-chol (85), continue to receive foreign ambassadors credentials. (Note that this task is never given to North Korea's other pair of veeps: Kim Yong-ju, Kim Il-sung's brother, whose purge by his jealous nephew is surely imminent; or the formerly Japan-based Kim Pyong-sik.) Then again, a somewhat neglected point is that since the National Defence Commission is the most senior state body after the president, Kim Jong-il could be said to be already exercising formal state power in his capacity as chairman of the NDC.

Irregular Process

So having already got the highest state and military posts going (the latter also as commander-in-chief), Kim Jong-il has in a sense completed the trio with his recent party post. Any idea that this signals some return to due process and normality, at least by North Korean standards, must however confront the highly unorthodox way in which this election took place. The publicity surrounding the Chinese communist party's 15th Congress in September reminds us all the more starkly of North Korea failure to do likewise. There has been no KWP congress since the Sixth, in 1980, at which Kim Jong-il's designation as heir-apparent was first made public.

This means that the currently serving party Central Committee (CC) is still the same one elected 17 years ago (although in practice there have been ups and downs, not to mention deaths). Article 24 of the WPK rules, as revised at that same Sixth Congress, states unambiguously that "the party Central Committee . . .

"On October 8, it was announced that Kim Jong-il had been appo-inted general secretary of the ruling Korean Workers Party (KWP)."

"Any idea that this signals some return to due process and normality, at least by North Korean standards, must however confront the highly unorthodox way in which this election took place."

* The following is the abbreviated text of an article written for the forthcoming Winter 1997 edition of HRI's *The Economics of Korean Unification*. Mr. Aidan Foster-Carter is the Director of the Korea Project at Leeds University in England. He writes regularly on North Korea, including for the EIU in London and a monthly *North Korea Report*, published by Breen, Gustaveson and Wayne Consulting in Seoul.

elects the general secretary." But although Kim Jong-il's appointment was announced by the CC—jointly with the KWP Central Military Commission, the shadowy body which (as in China) may well hold ultimate power—in fact it is far from clear whether the CC actually met to make this decision. (It had not convened since Kim Il-sung's death.)

Instead, all the emphasis was placed on a series of provincial-level meetings, as well as some within institutions—the military first and foremost —which nominated or acclaimed Kim Jong-il, unanimously of course. In a gushing editorial on October 10—the KWP's 52nd anniversary, with which Kim's appointment was no doubt timed to coincide—the party daily *Rodong Sinmun* not only acknowledged that due process had not been followed, but made a positive virtue of this fact:

"We upheld the supreme leader of the party through a great political work by the whole party, instead of going through a working-level procedure [*silmujok cholcha*]. This is the event unprecedented in history of building the party of the working class. This is a proud event which can take place only in the glorious juche-type revolutionary party, whose leader is great and in which perfect harmony with the leader is achieved. It is also the highest essence in our style of building of party organizations." Or again: "Our people do not follow a certain official position, but follow their leader [*yongdoja*] from the bottom of their hearts as a great comrade, a great teacher, and a great father . . . ." [Translated in BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, Part 3 Asia-Pacific, no FE/3049,14 October 1997, pages D/2 and D/3]

For those lucky enough to be unfamiliar with the genre, this short extract gives the authentic flavour of official North Korean discourse. It gets no better; indeed if anything it gets worse. Foreign comment had predictable but well-deserved fun with Pyongyang's claims of supernatural phenomena to mark the dear leader's elevation, such as fruit trees blossoming out of season and fishermen catching a rare albino sea-cucumber.

"Having already made a double travesty of Marxism-Leninism... North Korea has now added an explicit preference for irrationalism and triumph of the will over rules, regulations, and reason."

"North Korea's formal civilian elites have enjoyed an apparent stability much greater than their counterparts in South Korea."

Worrisome Irrationality

And yet this is more sad than amusing—and serious too. Having already made a double travesty of Marxism-Leninism—by emphasizing nation more than class, and theorizing the Leader as the "top brain of the political organism"—North Korea has now added an explicit preference for irrationalism and triumph of the will over rules, regulations, and reason. It may be tactless to say so, but strictly speaking these are the tenets no longer of communism or even Stalinism, but of fascism. The same article called on the party to be Kim Jong-il's first vanguards, in which the spirits of guns and bombs and the spirit of self-destruction overflow (ibid, page D/5).

For those of us who hope—and who does not?—that North Korea might some day soon choose to become a slightly more normal country, this is not encouraging. Still, there is more to politics than rhetoric alone. Despite this disdain for "working-level procedure" now that Kim Jong-il is officially at the helm of the party—in what is already being proclaimed in Pyongyang as a new era—it would be odd if he does not soon move to end the curious freeze which for the past three years has kept the upper echelons of both party and state in limbo. With rare exceptions (such as replacing many officials in agriculture, not surprisingly), and in sharp contrast to the military whose top brass has seen major changes in rank order, North Korea's formal civilian elites have enjoyed an apparent stability much greater than their counterparts in South Korea—where ministers are lucky if they last more than a few months.

Kitchen Cabinet?

Of course this stasis is a facade. The Seoul daily *Joong-Ang Ilbo* claimed on September 20 that Kim Jong-il actually rules through an informal committee of 20 trusted aides, meeting two or three times per week, rather than via any of the official institutions of either the party or the state. Strikingly, while some of this top 20 are familiar party figures (Kye Ung-tae, Kim Kuk-tae, Chon Byong-ho) or top brass (Cho Myong-nok, Kim Yong-jun —and O Guk-ryol, interestingly), more than half are virtual unknowns whose nominal rank may be no higher than deputy director. Only two are state officials, both vice-ministers: Kang Sok-ju (foreign affairs), who negotiated the nuclear agreed framework with the U.S., and Chong Sun-ku (machine industry). The latter is the only technocrat: the rest, depressingly, are party or security apparatchiks.

All political systems have their kitchen cabinets and eminences grises. Kim Jong-il seems to enjoy the shadows more than the limelight and to trade on the aura of mystery which surrounds him, so perhaps this gulf between the nominal and the real power-holders in Pyongyang will continue for a while yet. But if only because the existing Politburo would eventually succumb to mortality, it seems reasonable to expect formal reshuffles—perhaps even purges—as Kim Jong-il promotes his own generation and allies. (There is also the issue of the Supreme People's Assembly, Pyongyang's rubber-stamp parliament. The SPA has not met since Kim Il-sung died, and is in any case out of time, since what passes for a general election in North Korea—99.9% turnout, 100% yes vote—was due in 1995 but did not take place. Under Article 91 of the 1992 Constitution, it is the SPA that elects the president.)

From the outside world's viewpoint, the question of who holds power in North Korea is hard to separate from what they do with it. During these past three years Pyongyang has often seemed leaderless in substance as well as formally. With the single important exception of the nuclear issue, the sense of drift already apparent in Kim Il-sung's final years has continued since his death. Above all, not even the spectre of famine yet suffices to spur the kind of radical economic restructuring which the rest of the world sees as self-evidently essential and urgent—but which North Korea's crass and crippling rhetoric of infallibility makes it impossible to admit to. To quote again from the same *Rodong Sinmun* article:

"During the whole period led by the great comrade Kim Jong-il, our party was always successful in revolution and construction, did not run about in confusion, and did not make any mistakes in carrying out lines."

Some Changes Underway

And yet, bombast of this kind notwithstanding, there are signs that in practice, if not yet in theory, North Korea is changing. It could hardly not. The regime perforce tolerates both markets and movement so that people may feed themselves—perhaps for fear of revolt if it tried to stop them. It may view these as temporary concessions; but once established, can they ever be reversed? There are reports too of de facto agricultural reform, with contracts offered to sub-work teams which are in fact family units. The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) is even making microcredit loans to farmers to purchase pigs and chickens. Meanwhile in the Rajin-Sonbong free zone just about anything goes, with locals allowed to run businesses and a won-dollar exchange rate which differs from the official one by an astonishing 100:1 (because

"Kim Jong-il seems to enjoy the shadows more than the limelight and to trade on the aura of mystery which surrounds him."

"And yet, bombast of this kind notwithstanding, there are signs that in practice, if not yet in theory, North Korea is changing."

"Even now the signs are ambiguous, notably as regards the four-way talks, where in September Pyongyang infuriated the US by insisting on agenda items which it knew were a non-starter."

"If Pyongyang seriously wants to join multilateral financial institutions such as the ADB, IMF and World Bank, it will have to learn to put up with a degree of scrutiny, critique, and demand for data by foreigners which it is bound to find deeply uncongenial if not downright impossible."

it reflects the true rate, i.e. the black market).

The pace of overtures to the wider world has also quickened. North Korea wants to join the Asian Development Bank, and had its first visit from the International Monetary Fund in September. Another visitor (secret at first) was the Daewoo group chairman Kim Woo-choong: ostensibly to sort out Daewoo's export factory at Nampo—still the only South Korean joint venture up and running in North Korea—but perhaps also on a political errand, or so it is rumoured in Seoul. The two Koreas have signed an air agreement which from next year will allow flights to and from Kimpo to pass through northern airspace. Nuclear cooperation at Kumho is thriving, despite such hiccups as northern wrath when a picture of Kim Jong-il was found in a wastebin.

Or again, the first-ever group of Japanese wives of North Korean returnees is due to visit Japan in early November, not before time, while a delegation from Tokyo's ruling coalition will go to Pyongyang soon after. There is talk of an exchange of liaison offices with not only Tokyo but even Taipei; and while the original liaison office idea, with Washington, still seems stalled, bilateral visits continue. The latest trips by a U.S. MIA team and by Congress-man Tony Hall both had journalists in tow, and penetrated hitherto restricted areas such as Chagang province and Hamhung. Economic ties are being renewed with Russia, including moves to settle the massive debts to the former USSR which Pyongyang previously refused to discuss.

Still Too Closed

All this is positive. At the very least we are on one of the periodic upswings in North Korea's reaching out to the wider world: the first such since 1990-92, in fact. In the past, however, such outreach has sooner or later been undone as the hermit crab scuttles back into its shell. Even now the signs are ambiguous, notably as regards the four-way talks, where in September Pyongyang infuriated the US by insisting on agenda items (such as troop withdrawal) which it knew were a non-starter. It is not clear whether the four-way process will now resume before next year, by which time South Korea will have a new president who may be more acceptable to Pyongyang (he could hardly be less so) than Kim Young-sam.

Even the toes in the water mentioned above are tentative, and could quickly be withdrawn. What if one or more Japanese wives refuses to return to North Korea? That aside, better ties between Pyongyang and Tokyo will mean confronting the very issues which caused dialogue to be ruptured last time around in 1992: kidnapping, drugs, missiles, and more. Or again, if Pyongyang seriously wants to join multilateral financial institutions such as the ADB, IMF and World Bank, it will have to learn to put up with a degree of scrutiny, critique, and demand for data by foreigners which it is bound to find deeply uncongenial if not downright impossible.

Witness the performance of a North Korean deputy minister in Hong Kong recently. Kim Mun-song, vice-chairman of Pyongyang's External Economic Commission, attended a regional meeting of the World Economic Forum in October. His presentation was professional enough, with facts and figures on the free zone plus confirmation that bonded processing and trading zones have been established in Nampo and Wonsan as well as Rajin-Sonbong. But answering questions revealed a certain ambivalence. While paying respects to Chinese reforms, he hedged on whether North Korea might follow suit (without denying it outright). And a query as to whether the North's economic problems can allow profitable foreign investment brought a sharp

(*continued on p.24*)