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**Master's Thesis of Political Science**

**How Kim Jong-un Tames  
the North Korean 'Power Elites'**

김정은 정권의 권력 엘리트 통치 전략

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# **How Kim Jong-un Tames the North Korean ‘Power Elites’**

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**Submitting a master’s thesis of Political Science**

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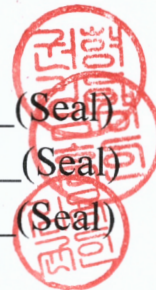
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# Abstract

By analyzing the power elite of the Kim Jong-un regime from the perspective of autocratic theory, this thesis reveals Kim Jong-un's strategy of taming power elites and explores the meaning of the political changes in North Korea.

Previous studies on the power elite in North Korea have focused mainly on analyzing the origins and backgrounds of individual power elites or their connection with Suryeong. This thesis interprets the analysis and data on the North Korean power elite achieved by these previous studies from the perspective of autocratic theory. The autocratic theory is useful because it distinguishes between groups of acts that form a dictatorship and reveals the operating principles of dictatorship through changes in their relationships. In particular, the Selectorate Theory of Bueno de Mesquita (BdM) explains the relationship between the ruler and the Winning Coalition through the size of the Selectorate and the Winning Coalition, which is the basis of the theoretical discussion in this thesis.

Kim Jong-un diminishes the size of power elites in an effort to consolidate the dictator's political standing. And he staves off factional coalitions from forming by stirring up organizational structure and frequent cabinet/elite reshuffle. These two strategies are accompanied by an institutional change in the 'normalization' of the Party-Sate System. This thesis analyzes the party's empowerment in North Korea from the perspective of Kim Jong-un's strategy of maintaining his dictatorship.

**Keyword : Kim Jong-un Regime, Power Elites, Autocratic Theory, Selectorate Theory, Party-State System, North Korea**

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# Chapter 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Research Questions

The purpose of this paper is to examine the elite coalition strategy of the Kim Jong-un regime. Worker's Party of Korea (WPK hereafter) is arguably one of the most salient features of North Korea under Kim Jong-un's reign. In 2013 Kim Jong-un amended "Ten Principles for the Establishment of the Monolithic Ideology System of the Party" that was originally promulgated by his grandfather into his version of "Ten Principles for the Establishment of the Monolithic Guidance System of the Party". Following this was the 7th Party Congress that was absent in North Korea for 36 years, to replace the National Defense Committee (NDC hereinafter) with the State Affairs Commission (SAC hereinafter) at the 13th Supreme People's Assembly in 2016.<sup>1</sup>

Kim Jong-un's rather new emphasis on the Party-State System should be distinguished from the socialist system's collective leadership system. Specifically, the inception of Party-State System Normalization at the end of Kim Jong-il's term was designed precisely at separating the country from the so-called military-driven 'emergency strategy system'. Lacking adequate respect and charisma like that of his father particular after destroying this guardian system, Kim Jong-un his early days relied heavily on fear politics, best known to outsiders for 'purging' many of his prospective adversaries.

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<sup>1</sup> Kap-Sik Kim, "Analysis on the 4th Session of the 13th Supreme People's Assembly of North Korea", *Online Series*, CO 16-19(2016.6.30.), Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU).



At the same time, he focused on so-called ‘procedural democratization’ and ideological justification for the purpose of strengthening his leadership. Even before Kim Jong-un’s full-fledged inauguration, he reconvened the Supreme People’s Assembly after two months from the last assembly to deal with the election and the new appointment of the NDC, to stage transparency of the political process internally and externally. Also, after 44 years from the 2nd Party Congress followed the 3rd of it held in September 2010, to appoint Kim Jong-un as vice chairman of the WPK’s Central Military Commission (CMC hereinafter), hinting that the WPK’s CMC will have a leading power to the military and the NDC.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, as part of his effort to ideological justify his power, Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il were crowned as eternal leaders and eternal general secretary at the 4th Party Congress, defining the Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism. While Kim Jong-un abstracted his grandfather’s *Juche* ideology and his father’s Military-First ideology, he differentiated himself from his predecessors to highlight his own Practice Ideology.<sup>3</sup>

In the eyes of North Korean elites, fear politics and legitimacy crisis of a supreme leader are enough of incentives to leave the dictator. But the North Korean elites have not dramatically dodged away from the supreme leader, at least based on accessible evidences at the point of this writing. How can North Korea’s elite coalition remain so small, solid, and loyal to Kim Jong-un? What explains this durability in spite of the odds of instability? Situated in this backdrop, this thesis

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<sup>2</sup> Jung-Chul Lee, “The Third Conference of the Korean Worker’s Party and Its Succession Process: A Comparison with the Chinese Succession Experience in the 1970s”, *The Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 8(1), (March 2011), (in Korean).

<sup>3</sup> Keun-sik Kim, “Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism in Kim Jong-un Era: The Abstraction of *Juche* and *Songun* Ideologies”, *South Korea and International Politics*, 30(1), (2014), pp. 65-92, (in Korean).

will focus on Kim Jong-un's strategy to treat WPK power elites.

Park Yong-ja conceptualized high-ranking political elites who are believed to have concurrent posts in two or more of North Korea's political position including in the party, government or military and have experience in influencing major policy decisions and enforcement as 'Power Elite.'<sup>4</sup>

This thesis will use Bueno de Mesquita (BdM)'s "Selectorate Theory" as a theoretical framework to analyze the elite coalition strategy of Kim Jong-un.<sup>5</sup> Though critics at times questioned the compatibility of the framework to cases other than that of BdM's, this theory has been found persuasive in explaining elite politics in authoritarian regimes. The most fundamental criterion to note in the BdM's Selectorate Theory is the size difference between the Selectorat( $S$ ) and Winning Coalition( $W$ ), i.e., the change in relative Proportions between the two.<sup>6</sup> Did Kim Jong-un use his strategy of reducing the size of  $W$  and increasing  $S$ ? Answering this question requires clear criteria for dividing the two groups and empirical data to predict the actual size. We will discuss this in the main chapter.

Below are some of the recent changes within the North Korean elites to be noted. Under the Kim Jong-un regime, the number of WPK's Central Committee members (including alternate members) and the entire new party members increased.<sup>7</sup> In addition, there has been increasing party-government-military cross-agency membership, a common personnel system in socialist countries. Moreover,

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<sup>4</sup> Yong-ja Park, "The Centralized Elites of Political Power and Post-Kim Jong-il' Period in North Korea", *Unification Policy Studies*, 18(2), (2009), (in Korean).

<sup>5</sup> Bruce Bueno de Mesquita et al, *The logic of political survival*, (MIT press, 2005); Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith. *The dictator's handbook: why bad behavior is almost always good politics*, (Public Affairs, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Gallagher, Mary E., and Jonathan K. Hanson. "Power tool or dull blade? Selectorate theory for autocracies." *Annual Review of Political Science* 18 (2015).

<sup>7</sup> Kap-Sik Kim, "Analysis on the 7th Congress of Korean Workers' Party(1): General Review", *Online Series*, CO 16-12(2016.5.11.), Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU).

despite the toughened economic sanctions, he has continued development of entertainment facilities for the welfare of the middle class in Pyongyang. Institutional changes that seem to increase the procedural transparency of democracy can be analyzed from his strategy.

How the rise of the WPK and the changes in the elite group affect the reinforcement of the supreme leader's power? On the flipside, what are the problems Kim Jong-un faces in stabilizing his winning coalition? And how does he increase the efficiency of elite management and limit them? The value that this thesis attempts to add is analyzing Kim Jong-un's strategy from the perspective of 'power elite coalition'. In other words, it does more than listing up individual elite figures or calculates the number of changes among them. Rather, this study attempts to capture the meaningful changes from the structuralist perspective.

As important, this thesis examines Kim Jong-un's strategy and its effectiveness by capturing changes in the North's political elite, on top of investigating the applicability of BdM's theory to North Korea case. Therefore, in addition to looking at the *S* and *W*'s scale, we should also look at how institutional and organizational changes and governing funds have affected the regime's stabilization. Through this careful analysis of the context, we hope to gauge the effects and prospects of Kim Jong-un's strategy, which will complement the ambiguity of the framework.

## 1.2. Research Methods and Materials

Two hypotheses to be tested in this thesis are as follows.

- (1) Kim Jong-un diminishes the size of power elites in an effort to consolidate the dictator's political standing.
- (2) Kim Jong-un staves off factional coalitions from forming by stirring up organizational structure and frequent cabinet/elite reshuffle.

The above-mentioned regime-stabilizing strategies, reified specifically via 'elite taming,' will be studied in the backdrop of 'Party-State System Normalization,' arguably a North Korea-specific (even of Kim Jong-un's) invention.

This study takes the content analysis method as field investigation on North Korea is impossible. Due to the character of North Korea, which advocates strict secrecy, it is virtually impossible to obtain detailed information related to the organizations, functions of specialized departments within the WPK, and information about the actions of elite individual, even if field visit had been possible very exceptionally.

To solve this problem, I use the following two methods. The first is a cross-analysis of previous studies on primary sources and interviews by North Korean defectors. Although there may be deficiencies in referring to secondary sources without a guarantee for a complete objectivity, cross-analysis is one way, if not the only, to examine the objectivity of and at the same time reconstruct the result derived from the primary data that continues to be valuable academically. In particular, in North Korean studies, to examine discourse changes chronologically

to analyze omissions or deletions of essential contents have significant meanings.

Second, I use various media materials such as photos of domestic and overseas media coverage on North Korea. Ample digital data are accessible pertaining to the Kim Jong-un regime, the subject matter of this research. Through this I present a rough yet significant sketch of the regime and study how they project themselves in the media. For example, recent studies of North Korea used digital text mining method or analysis of media exposure, to better trace the process of power change or policymaking within the regime.<sup>8</sup>

The most fundamental data to be analyzed are Kim Jong-un's comments and his writings. It is essential to analyze the officially published materials written by the Suryeong to grasp his ideas, theories, intentions, will, policies, and guidance directions. Because Kim Jong-un's writings are not as widely available as Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, previous studies on Kim Jong-un looks closely into *Rodong Shinmun* (Labor Newspaper)<sup>9</sup> and *külloja* (Workers)<sup>10</sup>, which are all WPK's official propaganda machines. Specifically, *külloja*, a monthly magazine targeting mainly party executives and members can be more useful than *Rodong Shinmun* with regards to analyzing institutional political system and elite level political dynamics. Because it targets party executives and party members more than *Rodong Shinmun*. *Korean Central News Agency* and *Korean Central Television*, the

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<sup>8</sup> Paasha Mahdavi, and John Ishiyama. "Dynamics of the inner elite in dictatorships: Evidence from North Korea." *Comparative Politics* 52.2 (2020), pp. 221-249.

<sup>9</sup> The *Rodong Sinmun* is an organ of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea and is well-known as a medium representing the North's official position. Its duty is to explain the party's line and policy, revolutionize society and man, strengthen the Labor WPK's organization, and establish the monolithic system.

<sup>10</sup> The *külloja* journal is a political theory magazine of the WPK. It is published mainly to present measures for the party, promote the party's policies and policies, contributing to the establishment of a monolithic ideology system for Kim Il-sung, contributing to the communist culture of party officials, party members, workers, and serving as an organization and propaganda for the party's central committee.

North Korean state-run broadcasting service are also crucial in the same sense.

To focus more specifically on analyzing “normalization” of Party-State System aspects of institutional changes, I will focus on the rules and regulations of the Kim Jong-un regime, such as the North Korean Socialist Constitution, WPK Code<sup>11</sup>, and “The Ten Principles of the Monolithic Guidance System of the Party.”<sup>12</sup> Information and data from South Korean national agencies such as the Ministry of Unification and international news such as *VOA (Voice of America)*, *NK News*, and *38 North* will be useful.

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<sup>11</sup> The WPK Code is the party’s supreme norm and contains the party’s identity, party’s organizational principles and structure, and the party organization within the Korean People’s Army.

<sup>12</sup> The “Ten Principles” are a doctrine of WPK and are deemed to be more important than the North Korean Constitution and WPK Code.

### **1.3. Composition of the Thesis**

The thesis is structured into 6 chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the research questions, research methods, and analyzed materials in studying the power elite in North Korea.

Chapter 2 will discuss previous studies about the political system of North Korea and dictatorship theories. First, the Communist Party-State System is the basis for establishing North Korea, and we must understand it because Kim Jong-un tries to restore the authority and function the ‘party’. The focus is to explain why this system was structured specifically in North Korea, and why it has changed on every regime transition. Furthermore, we will review social scientific theories on dictatorship and autocratic regimes. Among others, BdM’s Selectorate Theory is fitting to the study of autocratic states, the strategy of dictator to strengthen power and regime stability from the perspective of relationship between dictator and power elite, in particular. Through this, I examine whether Kim Jong-un shrank and reshuffled the power elite coalition.

Chapter 3 examines the “normalization” of the Workers' Party of Korea regarding Kim Jong-un's strategy to stabilize the regime. It analyzes how he justifies the ideology, make use of WPK guidance in forming personality cult, and how his legitimacy fortified through the changes of the WPK. Let us look at where the current Kim Jong-un regime began to normalize the Party-State System and how it has changed during his transition and stability period. The primary focus here is to investigate the meaning of “normalization” in terms of Kim Jong-un’s elite strategy, not just strengthening or returning to the party-centrism.

In Chapter 4, an empirical study on the power elite of the Kim Jong-un

regime is conducted to find out if he used the strategy to reduce his winning coalition and figure out how the phenomenon turned out. And by looking at the WPK's organization and personnel reshuffle, we will identify conflicts between significant institutions and departments. Through this we can better judge whether Kim Jong-un tried to maintain power by breaking the balance of the existing winning coalition.

Chapter 5 shows how Kim Jong-un incentivize loyal supporters through his resource allocation policy to stabilize his regime, also in the light of autocratic theories. Depending on to whom the WPK, which has exclusive control over all resources in the communist system, grants permission to use, along with Kim Jong-un political fund management a new elite coalition structure can be formed. Kim Jong-un's strategy effectively prevents North Korean elites from forming their coalition and factions through frequent personnel changes and reorganization.

Finally, in Chapter 6, I will conclude the research results and present its implication. Here I describe the effectiveness, limitations, and prospects about Kim Jong-un's elite coalition strategy detailed in this thesis. The ongoing economic sanctions on North Korea and the changes of the 8<sup>th</sup> Party Congress will also be taken into account.



## Chapter 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Studies of Party-State System

Building up previous studies on the Party-State System and Suryeong (Supreme Leader), I first examine previous literatures on the North Korean political system. The North Korean political system is arguably undergirded by both the ‘communist party system’ and the ‘Suryeong system’, which resembles a monarchy. The WPK functions as the socialist country's vanguard and as an organization in favor of Suryeong's dictatorship. In other words, the North Korean political system changes depending on how the functions and the status of the WPK changes. Thus, in studying North Korean political system, analyzing the relationship between Suryeong and the WPK elite is essential task for all researchers.

Prior to 1980s, major studies dealt with the formation and development of the WPK, factional struggles within the party followed by Kim Il-sung's gaining of control, and the significance of the establishment of the Central People's Committee.<sup>13</sup> As the Cold War eased in the late '80s, efforts to define North Korean political system diversified along with many analytical concepts. Notable cases understood North Korean political system as means of totalitarianism, a military state, one-party dictatorship, Suryeong socialisms, (models of) theocracy,

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<sup>13</sup> Koon Woo Nam, *The North Korean Communist Leadership, 1945-1965: A Study of Factionalism and Political Consolidation* (Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1974); Dae-Sook Suh, *Kim Il Sung: The North Korean Leader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

modern feudalism, and Corporatism, to name a few.<sup>14</sup>

While all concepts and explanations have their respective usefulness, they commonly agree that the Suryeong system is totalitarian at its core. Standard narratives on ‘totalitarian’ North Korea are interlinked with following key words: the Juche ideology, the WPK as the sole party, the police organization and political prisoner camps as social control tools, the control of the mass media by the party, the Korean People's Army as a regime-maintenance mechanism, and the centrally planned economy as a way to build a self-reliant national economy.<sup>15</sup>

However, concepts devised from studies of classical totalitarianism, Hitler's Nazism (National Socialism) or Stalinian Communism as case in points, cannot automatically be applied when studying contemporary autocratic systems. After all, the fundamental question regarding North Korea's political system is to what extent the system shows ‘post-totalitarian’ features. In this regard, Gavan McCormack’s idea of Neo-totalitarianism is noteworthy, which analyzes North Korea with surveillance, terrorism, and mobilization.<sup>16</sup> Leem Kyung Hoon, however, argues that North Korea is not a collective leadership system and cannot be seen as an early stage of post-totalitarian.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Robert A. Scalapino and Chong-Sik Lee, *Communism in Korea: The Society*. vol. 2. (University of California Press, 1972); Masayuki Suzuki, *Kim Jong-il and Suryeong System Socialism*, (Seoul: Chungangilbosa, 1994, in Korean); Jong-seok Lee, “A Study on the Change of Structure and the WPK’s Guidance Ideology: Juche Ideology and Monolithic Guidance System,” (Doctoral Dissertation, Sungkyunkwan University Graduate School, 1993, in Korean); Bruce Cumings, “Corporatism in North Korea,” *Journal of Korean Studies*, Vol. 4 (1983).

<sup>15</sup> Il Hwan Oh, “Current Situation of North Korean regime in the Kim Jong-il,” *The Theory of Contemporary North Korean System* (Seoul: Eulyu Culture History, 2000, in Korean); Jung-soo Lee, “A Study on the Political System of North Korea: The Totalitarian Characteristics,” (Doctoral Dissertation, Seoul National University Graduate School, 1991, in Korean).

<sup>16</sup> Gavan McCormack, “Kim country: hard times in North Korea.” *New Left Review* (1993), pp. 21-21.

<sup>17</sup> Kyung Hoon Leem, “North Korea’s Political System and Its Probable Paths of

Among the studies focusing on the Suryeong system, Suzuki Masayuki's "Suryeong Socialism" comes under criticism for putting the Suryeong on top of the socialist system.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, Lee Jong-Seok's "Monolithic Guidance System" explains the role of the Juche ideology of unifying the Suryeong, the WPK and the people based on his understanding of the "Revolutionary Suryeong" and the "The Theory of Social and Political Life."<sup>19</sup>

Academics have growingly researched the rise of the military and party-military relations after Kim Il-sung passed away in 1994, as Kim Jong-il, self-crowned as the Chairman of DPRK National Defense Committee, announced *Songun jongchi* (Military-First politics). Wada Haruki argued that North Korea no longer became a Guerrilla Unit State, but a Regular Army State<sup>20</sup>, and Seo Dong-man argues that the military has shifted to a more qualitative role than before.<sup>21</sup> Opinions differ here on whether the military's role has risen to the same level as the status of the party, or whether it can be seen as a military-centered crisis management system or as a party-dominant, military-focused system.<sup>22</sup> Notable studies on the party-military relationship and the party-government relationship

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Transition: A Comparative Perspective", presentation paper for the 11th International Convention of Asia Scholars, (July 17, 2019).

<sup>18</sup> Masayuki Suzuki, *ibid*; Tae Sub Lee, "The Collective Developmental Strategy and the Establishment of the 'Suryeong System' in North Korea, 1956-1967" (Doctoral Dissertation, Seoul National University Graduate School, 2001, in Korean).

<sup>19</sup> Jong-seok Lee, *The Study on Workers' Party of the Korea*, (Seoul: History of Criticism, 1995, in Korean), p. 16. "The Theory of Social and Political Life" was first suggested by Kim Jong-il in 1986 and is a governing logic that the entire North Korean society is a complete collective social relationship.

<sup>20</sup> Haruki Wada, "The Structure and Political Culture of the Kim Jong Il Regime: Its Novelty and Difficulties," A Study on the Presentation of Kyungnam University and Amrican University, (May 1998, requotation of Kap Sik Kim's thesis, in Korean).

<sup>21</sup> Dong Man Seo, "The Contemporary Opinion on the Change of the Political System of North Korea," Korean Political Research Association, *Political Criticism*, (Seoul: Green Forest, 1998, in Korean).

<sup>22</sup> Kap Sik Kim, "Kim Jong-un Regime's Suryeong System and the Party-State-Military Relations," *Korea and World Politics*, vol. 30, no.1 (March 2014, in Korean), pp. 29-64.

include Jang Dal-jung and Kim Gap-sik.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Dal Jong Chang, "Ideology, the Party and the Masses in the Kim Jung Il System," The Journal of Asiatic Studies (ARI), 42(1), (1999, in Korean); Kap Sik Kim, *ibid.*

## 2.2. Studies of Dictatorships

Now that we have looked at studies analyzing North Korea from the Party-State System's framework, we look at studies that analyzes the relationship between dictators and political elites in autocratic countries. Neo-institutionalism in the 2000s resurfaced, incorporating orthodox institutionalism with actor-centric perspectives to studies of dictatorships and their institutional diversity. Previous scholarships notably by Geddes, Brownlee, Gandhi, Magaloni, Wintrobe, and Svobik have analyzed how institutional factors like elite, elections, the actions groups, and the related actors have brought about institutional diversity of dictatorship.<sup>24</sup> Representatively, Geddes explains the negotiating game between the dictator and the elite at the actor level, while Svobik analyzes the elite's uncertain behavior patterns and unstable loyalty when they doubt the dictator's political intentions.<sup>25</sup> And Geddes classified dictatorships into military dictatorships, one-party dictatorships, and individual dictatorships, depending on who controls access to political posts.<sup>26</sup> Studies ensued though aforementioned theoretical resources are no small contributions to the scholarship on contemporary authoritarian states.

To modify and develop the Geddes' classification, Magaloni removes personal dictatorships and classifies them as monarchy, one-party dictatorship,

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<sup>24</sup> Barbara Geddes et al, *How dictatorships work: Power, personalization, and collapse*, (Cambridge University Press, 2018); Jason Brownlee, "Hereditary succession in modern autocracies," *World Pol*, 59 (2006) p. 596; Jennifer Gandhi, "Political institutions under dictatorship," (2008): 1; Beatriz Magaloni, "Comparative autocracy," *Prepared for delivery at the conference "Research Frontiers in Comparative Politics,"* (Duke University. 2007); Ronald Wintrobe, *The political economy of dictatorship*, (Cambridge University Press, 2000); Milan W. Svobik, "Power sharing and leadership dynamics in authoritarian regimes," *American Journal of Political Science* 53.2 (2009), pp. 477-494.

<sup>25</sup> Barbara Geddes et al, Milan W. Svobik, *ibid*.

<sup>26</sup> Barbara Geddes, *Paradigms and Sand Castles: Theory Building and Research Design in Comparative Politics*, (Ann arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), p. 51.

dominant party dictatorship, and military dictatorship because of the mixed nature of individual dictatorships.<sup>27</sup> However, they continued to be inept for the study of North Korea as the regime can be classified under pretty much in all categories; monarchy, military dictatorship, one-party dictatorship, or an individual dictatorships. To this regard, Geddes and Magaloni's researches are useful in observing how the political game theory depends on each type of regime and the power group's characteristics.

Park Yong-ja, a researcher at the Korea Institute for National Unification, analyzed the Kim Jong-un regime based the third-generation dictatorship analysis.<sup>28</sup> She points out 'co-optation' and 'strategic repression' are at the core of the third-generation autocratic research. Furthermore, she points out four key words to the analysis of WPK under Kim Jong-un; legitimation, repression, co-optation, and governing funds. She also argues that the Kim Jong-un regime's stabilization strategy worked effectively.

Ultimately, this thesis's theoretical idea, which aims to analyze the relationship between the party and the Suryeong through the normalization of the party-state system, was influenced by the preceding studies of Jang Dal-jung and Kim Gap-sik, Leem Kyung Hoon, Lee Jung-Chul mentioned above. And this thesis referred to the facts of the Kim Jong-un regime and his power elite from the publication of the Korea Institute for National Unification.

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<sup>27</sup> Beatriz Magaloni, *ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Yong Ja Park, "The System and Function of the Workers' Party of Korea in Kim Jong-un Period: A Study on the Stabilization Strategy of Autocratic Regimes" (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, KINU, 2017, in Korean).

### 2.3. “Selectorate Theory” of Bueno de Mesquita

Based on game theory, the BdM argued for theories that encompass both democracy and dictatorship, internal and external policies. Among them, Selectorate Theory has been used as a powerful tool for analyzing autocracies through several existing studies. He classifies the government into two group, selectorate( $S$ ) who have a say in leadership choices and winning coalition( $W$ ) whose support is essential for leaders to remain in power.<sup>29</sup>

This classification is relevant to democracies and monarchies as well as to dictatorships. The  $W$  of democratic regime is large, while the  $W$  of dictatorships is small. Private goods such as money and land can easily satisfy small size of  $W$ . The BdM believes that foreign policies such as foreign aid, military intervention, and war will change depending on the size of the  $W$ . So, dictatorships with small  $W$  tend to be poor and suffer wars, revolutions, civil wars, and coups. However, the prime goal of this thesis is not to ensure that the Selectorate Theory generally applicable regardless of polity. Therefore, my thesis analyzes North Korea’s case from the perspective that the Selectorate Theory is useful in explaining the differences between authoritarian regimes. Before looking at the North Korean elite association through the Selectorate Theory, I address a criticism and a singularity that the North Korean case discomfits with the Selectorate Theory.

First, the essential thing in the Selectorate Theory is the proportion of  $S$  and  $W$ . BdM thought that the worst outcome for a society is when the  $W$  is small, and the  $S$  is large. However, he has never presented an exact ratio of  $S$  to  $W$ . This

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<sup>29</sup> Bruce Bueno de Mesquita et al, *The logic of political survival*, (MIT press, 2005); De Mesquita, Bruce Bueno, and Alastair Smith. *The dictator's handbook: why bad behavior is almost always good politics*, (Public Affairs, 2011).

ambiguity allows for researchers to arbitrarily interpret the ratio when it comes to studying specific cases. In North Korea as a case in point, one could go far even claim that all North Koreans belong to *S* save for the Kim family, regardless of their actual support for the regime. Above all, it is also a problem that the distinction between *S*, who has the right to speak, and *W*, whose support is essential for maintaining the regime, is ambiguous.

Second, the point where the Selectorate Theory is criticized is whether all *S* members can be considered equally powerful and share identical preferences. In addition, the theory does not consider people who don't have political rights, so rulers need not worry about the threat of rebellion.<sup>30</sup> It is therefore enough to discuss the possibility of a revolution in earnest from the North Korean case, so I would like to skip it and look at the relationship of state-owned enterprises' managers in Chapter 5.

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<sup>30</sup> Gallagher, Mary E., and Jonathan K. Hanson. "Power tool or dull blade? Selectorate theory for autocracies." *Annual Review of Political Science* 18 (2015), p.372.



## **Chapter 3. Capitalizing on the Party-State System**

### **3.1. Succession Strategy for Kim Jong-un**

The Political system of a socialist country is a Party-State System, and the party's dominance takes precedence over the management of state institutions. After Kim Il-sung's death, Kim Jong-il, whose military-backed power based allowed for unfettered power succession, abolished the presidency and made the chairman of the National Defense Commission a top power post through a constitution revised in 1998. In place of party-centric governance system, Kim Jong-il systematized his personal leadership in deciding virtually all of the nation's critical issues. It also succeeded in maintaining power despite the crisis of the mid-1990s through the rule of Military-First Politics, which is 'politics that lead the army to the socialist feat as its main force.' Such strengthening of the military's status and role without in cost of Kim Jong-il's power and control, which can be understood as Kim Jong-il's use of the military's strong control capacity rather than a reversal of party relations.

Kim Jong-un on the other hand, contrived of strategies that differ from his father and grandfather. Due in large part to his lack of experience, he emphasized institutional procedures and WPK-centered governance much more than his predecessors in an effort to stabilize his regime as quickly as possible. The normalization of the Kim Jong-un regime into the Party-State System was a process that had already been prepared before Kim Jong-il's death. Specifically, the

Constitution was amended in 2009 at the 3<sup>rd</sup> WPK Congress in 2010 and the 4<sup>th</sup> WPK Congress in 2012 to lay the foundation for the institutionalization of power succession. As soon as Kim Jong-il died, Kim Jong-un became supreme commander of the North Korean military and was appointed as the first secretary of the WPK, a member of the WPK's Central Committee, and chairman of the WPK's Central Military Commission. Afterward, he became the first chairman of the National Defense Commission and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's head, occupying the party, government, and military position, and completing the power succession.

### 3.2. Reign of Terror under Kim Jong-un

Kim Jong-un has been increasing the intensity of oppression and surveillance through his reign of terror to prevent the power elite's exit. Since Kim Jong-un's inauguration, he has repeated targeted purges and executions, and maintained the elite's internal discipline by using the Organization & Guidance Department, the Ministry of State Security, and the General Political Bureau. In particular, the Kim Jong-un regime's execution is sudden, brutal, and public, which maximizes the atmosphere of fear. North Korea's power elites were originally very cohesive with one another, as it is built around a ruling party that has gained power through continuous and violent ideological struggles.<sup>31</sup> However, after Kim Jong-un's inauguration, North Korean diplomats exiled at times, indicating that the reign of terror was effective in short terms, but gradually turned out ineffective in disciplining the power elites' morale.

The strong reign of terror in the early days of Kim Jong-un's regime was one of the reasons that pundits thought that Kim Jong-un was likely to have difficulty in taking over the elite at the time. To some, it was also seen as a result of Kim Jong-un's collapse of the guardian system established by Kim Jong-il. Among Kim Jong-il's people, U Tong Chuk, Ri Yong Ho, Jang Song Thaek, Hyon Yong Chol are some of the most prominent figures who have been purged or dismissed. As of 2015, the number of high-level power elites in the party, military, and cabinet purged by Kim Jong-un reached 84.

The case of Jang Song Thaek's purge was regarded as a sign of instability

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<sup>31</sup> Steven R. Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, "Beyond Patronage: Violent Struggle, Ruling Party Cohesion, and Authoritarian Durability," *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 10, no. 4 (2012), p. 869.

of Kim Jong-un's regime in the early days at first. But it turned out that Kim Jong-un's Monolithic Guidance System was strengthened and has stabilized. Overrating Jang Song Thaek's death and belittling Kim Jong-un's power base for the sake of doing so is not the interest of this thesis. Rather, what should be noted about Jang's purge is the process of execution and conflict between power agencies.

On December 8, 2013, North Korea held an enlarged meeting of the Political Bureau of WPK Central Committee to decide purging of Jang, dismissing him from all duties and eventually to expel him. Four days later, he was sentenced to death and executed immediately. As such, the Kim Jong-un regime continues to hold meetings on all significant matters, including purges, as part of its effort to showcase the country's institutional legitimacy under the auspice of WPK, though questionable.

On the background of Jang's purge, Park Hyeong-jung explains that inter-factional and inter-agency power struggles are at the heart of Jang's death, amid power succession to Kim Jong-un from his predecessors.<sup>32</sup> In particular, the conflict over interests among agencies was related to the military's attempt to centralize foreign currency earnings while limiting trade interests. As Jang expanded his political and material base, the Organization & Guidance Department and the military protested, which drew Kim Jong-un's attention. As such, disputes between power agencies seeking trade interests under Kim Jong-un's strong leadership could cause rifts within the elite coalition, and which will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

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<sup>32</sup> Hyeong-jung Park, "The Dynamics of the Competition for Power and Interest under Suryong Dictatorship and the Purge of Jang Sung-taek", *South Korea and International Politics*, 30(1), (2014), (in Korean).

### 3.3. “Normalization” in Context

Both Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un made it clear that North Korea is a Party-State System, so it is not new for WPK to have the edge over state institutions and the army. It is also true that the policy-making process and personnel affairs follow party leadership. Compared to Kim Jong-il’s Military-First Politics, however, the WPK fully returned to its functional role in managing state affairs during the Kim Jong-un regime. Above all, as mentioned above, the party has strengthened its policy-making function through official meetings. Notable examples include Elite’s decision to dismiss or execute, the adoption of an “*Byungjin*”(parallel development policy of economy and nuclear) during a plenary session of the Party Central Committee (PCC) in 2013, the revision of related laws through the Supreme People’s Assembly , and the continuation of an expanded meeting of the WPK’s Central Military Commission. Below are conferences by WPK and content of major decisions since the beginning of Kim Jong-un’s reign to the 7<sup>th</sup> Congress of the WPK.

**<Table 1> Status of Conferences Held by WPK Central Committee,  
Central Military Commission, Political Bureau**

When	Conference Title	Content of Major Decisions
June 2011	Enlarged Meeting of the Party Political Bureau	Discussion on result of Kim Jong-il's visit to China (5.20~26) Dismissal of Secretary Hong Sok-hyong of the WPK
December 2011	Meeting of the Party Political Bureau	Kim Jong-un named Supreme Commander
July 2012	Meeting of the Party Political Bureau	Dismissal of Chief Ri Houngh-ho of the General Staff of the Korean People's Army
November 2012	Enlarged Meeting of the Party Political Bureau	Establishment of the State Physical Culture and Sports Guidance Commission and naming Jong Song-taek as the Chairman
February 2013	Meeting of the Party Political Bureau	Proposal of major projects associated with 60th anniversary of Korean War ceasefire & 65th anniversary of founding of the North Korean government
March 2013	Plenary Meeting of the Party Central Committee	Adoption of Party's line of "simultaneously conducting economic construction and building up nuclear forces" (i.e., 'Byungjin Line')
Feb, Aug 2013	Enlarged Meeting of the Party Central Military Commission	Decision making on major military policies
December 2013	Enlarged Meeting of the Party Political Bureau	Vice Chairman Jang Song-taek of the National Defense Commission being removed from the Party membership and dismissal from all posts
April 2014	Meeting of the Party Political Bureau	Discussion of organizational reinforcement and structural issues
April 2014	Enlarged Meeting of the Party Central Military Commission	Discussion of structural issues
February 2015	Enlarged Meeting of the Party Political Bureau	Discussion of achievement plan of Kim Jong-il's dying instruction and structural issues

**Source:** KDI School of Public Policy and Management & Institute for Far Eastern Studies (IFES) of Kyungnam University, *2015 DPRK Country Report*, (2015), p. 23.

Since the 7<sup>th</sup> Party Congress of the WPK in May 2016, 22 more meetings have been held to Enlarged Meeting of the Party Political Bureau, and the Enlarged Meeting of the Party Central Military Commission has held five more meetings. Kim Jong-un does not want decisions on the purges and dismissals of bureaucrats as well as national security and economic policies to be seen as his own arbitrary decisions. Unlike his father, he held regular meetings of the Political Bureau and

military meetings whenever necessary, making such changes familiar. In includes holding a Party Congress whenever he wants to show or declare a significant policy change to internal and external.

Of course, the revision of the Constitution and the party's regulations led to visible institutional changes that restored its authority. However, through these meetings, Kim Jong-un arguably wants to be seen to have followed 'democratic process' instead of dictatorial handbook. Thus, the series of changes, referred to as "normalization" of the party system under the Kim Jong-un regime, can be seen as a strategy to justify his leadership by showing a hold on the party. Kim Jong-un, in other words, lacks traditional and charismatic authority compared to his grandfather and father.<sup>33</sup> The move to advocate a normal state in international relations can be understood as an extension of such efforts, so the "normalization" of WPK is far from China's collective leadership system. Instead, it is Kim Jong-un's version of strengthening the dictatorship of the Suryeong.

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<sup>33</sup> Max Weber distinguished three ideal types of legitimate political leadership, domination and authority; Weber, Max. *Economy and society: An outline of interpretive sociology*. Vol. (1) Univ of California Press, (1978). And Kwon Heonik described North Korea as a theater state and explained the North Korean leader's power as a hereditary power succession of Weber's charismatic leadership; Kwon, Heonik, and Byung-Ho Chung. *North Korea: beyond charismatic politics*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, (2012).

## **Chapter 4. Party over Winning Coalition: Maneuvering the Size**

### **4.1. Shrinking of the Winning Coalition**

The ruling coalition of Kim Jong-un's dictatorship is smaller than ever. In the last three years of Kim Jong-il's reign, there are about 25 of his closest allies, but in the three years since Kim Jong-un took office in 2012, there are about 14 of his closest advisors.<sup>34</sup> This means that the size of active cooperative groups has been reduced; like BdM's theory, small governing groups make it easier to manage and share interests.

More specifically, who are the closest people and power elite of the current Kim Jong-un regime? <Table 2> shows the WPK's key positions and members prepared after cross-checking data from the Unification Ministry and NK PRO.

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<sup>34</sup> Kap-Sik, Kim. "The Political System of Kim Jong-un's Regime: Continuities and Changes of Suryeong System, Party-Government-Military Relation and Power Elite", (2015).



**<Table 2> 2020 The Uppermost Power Elite**

	Position		Members
First Secretary of the WPK			Kim Jong-un
WPK Central Committee	Political Bureau	Presidium	Kim Jong-un, Choe Ryoung-hae, Pak Pong-ju, Ri Pyong-chol, Kim Tok-hun
		Members	Kim Jae-ryong, Ri Il-hwan, Choe Hwi, Pak Thae Dok, Kim Young-chol, Park Thae-song, Pak Jong-chon, Kim Su-gil, Thae Hyong-choi, Choe Pu-il, O Su-yong, Jong Kyong-thaek
		Alternate Member	Kim Hyong-jun, Pak Myong-sun, Ho Col-man, Jon Kwang-ho, Jo Yong-won, Kim Jong-gwan, Ri Ryong-nam, Im Chol-ung, Kim Il-chol, Jo Chun-ryong, Ri Son-gwon, Kim Young-hwan, Kim Yo-jong
	Executive Policy Bureau	Chairman	Kim Jong-un
		Vice-Chairman	Pak Pong-ju, Ri Il-hwan, Choe Hwi, Ri Pyong-chol, Kim Tok-hun, Kim Young-chol, Park Thae-song, Kim Hyong-jun, O Su-yong
	Central Military Commission	Chairman	Kim Jong-un
		Vice-Chairman	Ri Pyong-chol
		Members	Kim Jae-ryong, Choe Pu-il, Jong Kyong-thaek, Kim Jo-guk, So Hong-chan, Park Jong-chon, Wi Song-il, Rim Kwang-il, (Ri Man-gon, Kim Su-gil, Kim Jong-gwan, Kim Young-chol, Thae Jong-su, Jang Kil-song, Choe Ryong-Hae, Pak Pong-ju, Ri Myong-su)
	Department	Director	Ri Il-hwan, Ho Chol-man, Choe Tong-Myong, Kim Hyong-jun, Choe Pu-il, Ri Pyong-chol, Choe Hwi, Ro Kwang-sop, Kim Jun-son, Ri Yong-Rae, Ju Yong-sik, Han Kwang-sang, Jang Kum-chol, Sin Ryong-man, Kim Tok-hun, Ri Ho-rim, O Il-jong, O Su-yong
First Vice Director		Kim Jo-guk, Jo Yong-won (Organization&Guidance) Ri Jae-il, Ri Yong-sik (Propaganda&Agitation)	

**Source:** Created by author.

**Reference:** Ministry of Unification, 2020 List of names of North Korean organizations, (2020);  
Ministry of Unification North Korea Information Portal, “Power Structure of WPK,”

<<https://nkinfo.unikorea.go.kr/nkp/theme/getPowerStructureDang.do>>. (Date: December 2020.);

NK PRO Research Tool, “Organs of the WPK,”

<<http://lps3.www.nknews.org.libproxy.snu.ac.kr/pro/nk-leadership-organogram/organs>>.

**Notes:** Preliminary data for <Table 2> were retrieved from the Ministry of Unification and NK Pro, all of which were cross-checked.

Understandably, certain positions and individuals may have yet been publicized, which would make <Table 2> far from perfect. Moreover, it may be argued that the number of these figures is not much different from that of the Kim Jong-il regime.

So how do we know how many people are actually very close to Kim Jong-un? When studying political elites in a closed country like North Korea, previous studies found out about each elite through officially published *Rodong Sinmun* and later found the relationship between him and the Suryeong. Recently, however, Kim Jong-un has been actively using media reports, and the number of media specializing in North Korea has been increasing; showing us some new ways we can count the people who were associated with Kim Jong-un.

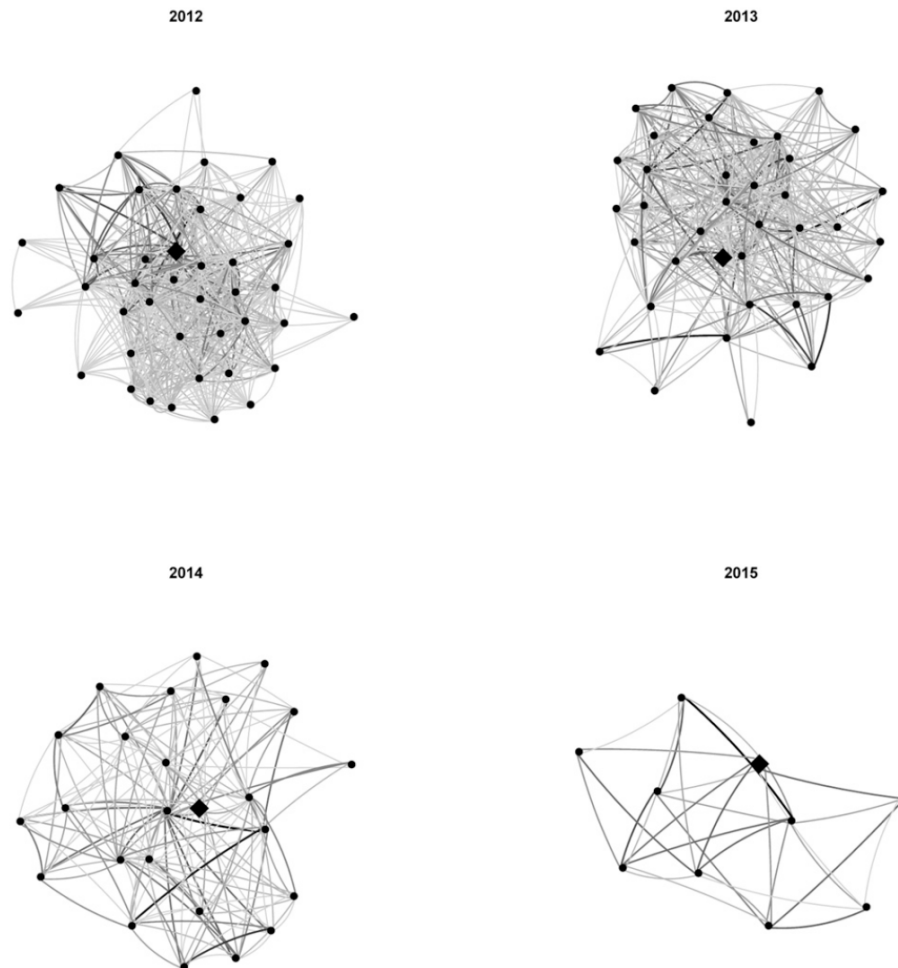
Paasha Mahdavi and John Ishiyama analyzed inspection visits (on-the-spot guidance) by Kim Jong-un as reported by the state-run Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) to discover dynamics of the North Korean inner elites.<sup>35</sup> ‘On-the-spot Guidance’ has a special meaning as a unique policy tool of the Suryeong in North Korea. On top of officials inspecting project sites to find out the current status and problems of the project and seek solutions, it is used to idolize the guidance of the Supreme Leader. Through network analysis techniques, they analyzed the relationship between North Korea’s political elites, who were spotted accompanying Kim Jong-un on the spot guidance from 2012 to 2014, and completed the pattern as shown in <Figure 1>. Changes in patterns also allow us to determine whom the center of power has shifted around in time. We can see from the figure that the size of the network has decreased over time. This phenomenon

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<sup>35</sup> Paasha Mahdavi, and John Ishiyama. "Dynamics of the inner elite in dictatorships: Evidence from North Korea." *Comparative Politics* 52.2 (2020), pp. 221-249.

could be one of the proofs that Kim Jong-un is shrinking his winning coalition.

**<Figure 1> North Korean Elite Co-Occurrence Network, 2012-2015**



**Source: Mahdavi, Paasha, and John Ishiyama. "Dynamics of the inner elite in dictatorships: Evidence from North Korea." *Comparative Politics* 52.2 (2020), p. 231.**

There is a clear limit to discerning and tallying up the number of Kim Jong-un's closest power elites simply based on his on-site guidance. However, Kim Jong-un's strategy of reducing the winning coalition does differentiate from that of

his predecessors if focused more on the aggregate size than numbers in particular.

North Korea was founded, at least in the eyes of North Koreans, through two fathers Kim's leadership (save for Kim Jong-un at this period) in the face of US imperialism. Subsequently, the idolized Suryeong and their purging of elites not as loyal left with an elite coalition extremely conservative and loyal in favor of the regime. What followed was even more efforts to diminish the size of winning coalition, through unfettered repression and excessive control over the society, often invoking external threats that never disappeared during their reign. To this, two fathers, Kim's left collective decision-making organs dysfunctional, keeping the influence of party political bureau upon them minimum, in their efforts to solidify their dictatorial standing.

On the contrary, Kim Jong-un has restored the Party-State System, the most fundamental characteristic of the socialist system, overhauled the party's institutional mechanisms and devices and liquidated his closest aides. These have taken place not as a knee-jerking reaction in the face of regime instability in the initial phase of his term but continues to appear all-throughout his leadership. Taking into account that party institutionalization, though to a different degree, curtailed the power of the supreme dictator in the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, the follow-up question is to ask how Kim Jong-un make use of both the party's institutionalization and winning coalition reduction strategies to his advantage.

## 4.2. Discussion of the Selectorate in North Korea

Making sense of this seeming contradictory move start from understanding how Kim Jong-un instantaneously reduces the winning coalition but increase the selectorate. Undoubtedly, it has to be viewed in the light of Party-System Normalization in North Korea.

According to BdM's Selectorate theory, there are selectorate( $S$ ) and the winning coalition( $W$ ), both of which are essential and strategic support base of the ruler. The selectorate is again subdivided into nominal and actual. Nominal selectorate refers to anyone with a legal voice in electing a ruler, a candidate who can become a winning coalition. On the other hand, the actual selectorate are those whose support is influential.

In North Korea, it is difficult to distinguish between the nominal selectorate and the actual selectorate clearly. Except for a few of Kim Jong-un's closest peoples, the whole bureaucratic machine of WPK can be considered selectorate. But not all of the nearly 6.5 million party members or Supreme People's Assembly (SPA hereinafter) have real political influence. The SPA, North Korea's highest sovereign and legislative body can be considered a nominal selectorate. However, the SPA members nominated through North Korean simple representation system can oppose neither the supreme leader nor the power elites. Simply put, SPA is a rubber stamp organization without the capacity hold officials accountable. In this context, BdM's idea of the nominal selectorate, where everyone has a legal say in electing a ruler, fails to account for the North Korean case.

Therefore, it is important to look at the difference between the size of the

entire selectorate group, including the nominal and actual, and the winning coalition's size, rather than the distinction between the nominal and actual. As mentioned above, Kim Jong-un aims make up for his lack of personal leadership and act a normal country via restoration of the party's authority. Compared to Kim Jong-il's later years, the number of people attending the WPK Congress is estimated to have increased. New party members are speculated to have increased, and the assembly has begun to take place regularly in every 5 years.

At the 7<sup>th</sup> Party Congress as a case in point, 3,467 representatives with the voting right and 200 representatives with the speaking right participated, exceeding 3,062 and 158 respectively from the 6<sup>th</sup> Party Congress. Kim Gap-sik analysis is in line with this estimate, for arguing that if the Party Congress Representative was elected at the same rate as the party membership, it would have been expanded, and if not, it could still be interpreted as an increase in the number of key members.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Kap-Sik Kim, "Analysis on the 7th Congress of Korean Workers' Party(1): General Review", *Online Series*, CO 16-12(2016.5.11.), Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU).

## **Chapter 5. Stirring Up the Elite Coalitions**

The Kim Jong-un regime is conducting frequent reorganization and personnel reshuffles in cost of the regime's stability after the transition period. There are two conflicting opinions to this behavior. One interprets this phenomenon as a strategy to stabilize the regime, and the other interprets it as a sign of power instability. From the perspective of autocracy theory, the reorganization and reshuffle of the winning coalition is a useful way to prevent the power elite from self-collecting and forming factions in autocratic countries. If certain group concentrates power, or if in case of fierce intergroup competition for power, the autocrat's grip on the elites will weaken, and might even destabilize the dictator's winning coalition.

### **5.1. Revamping the Bureaucracy**

#### **5.1.1. The Military**

In socialist countries, one-party dictatorships in particular, it is common for elites to assume several positions in party, government, and related agencies concurrently. In North Korea where the size of power elites is relatively small, such a tendency is more noticeable. North Korea's power elite increasingly holds multiple positions simultaneously, and what should be noted here is the relationship between the party, the military, and administrative branches. A typical military elite

in North Korea in the past must have completed his service in key positions in the ruling WPK, including the Central Committee of the Party. While it was common for power elites to hold party and administrative positions concurrently, it was not common for these people to also hold military positions. Under Kim Jong-un reign, however, it is easy to find a power elite with positions in the WPK Central Military Commission, the State Affairs Commission, and the Korean People's Army.

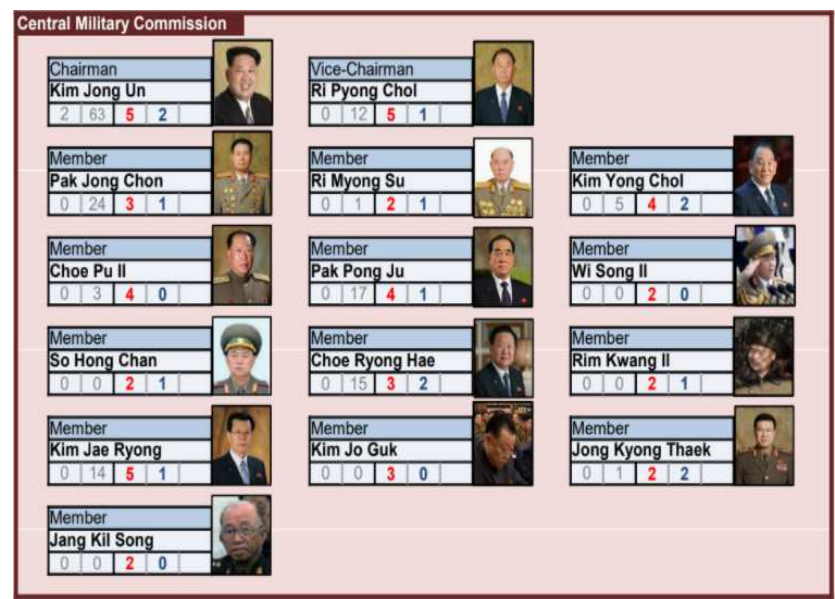
<Figure 2> Personnel Chart – State Affairs Commission



Source: NK PRO, DPRK Analysis, Research Tools & Datas (ver. Nov. 2020)  
 (http://lps3.www.nknews.org.libproxy.snu.ac.kr/pro/nk-leadership-organogram/state)

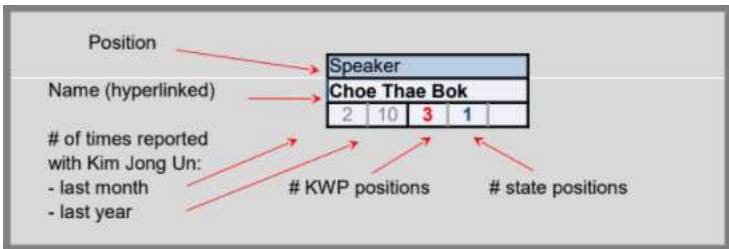


<Figure 3> Personnel Chart - Central Military Commission of WPK



Source: NK PRO, DPRK Analysis, Research Tools & Datas (ver. Nov. 2020)  
(<http://lps3.www.nknews.org.libproxy.snu.ac.kr/pro/nk-leadership-organogram/organs>)

<Figure 5> Description of Above Charts



**<Table 3> List of Military Elites Under the Kim Jong-un Regime**

	PCMC	SAC	KPA
1	Kim Jong-un	Kim Jong-un	Kim Jong-un
2	Ri Pyong-chol	Ri Pyong-chol	Ri Pyong-chol
3	Pak Jong Chon		Pak Jong Chon
4	Ri Myoung-su		
5	Kim Yong-chol	Kim Yong-chol	
6	Choe Pu-il		
7	Pak Pong-ju	Pak Pong-ju	
8	Wi Song-il		
9	So Hong-chan		
10	Choe Ryong-hae	Choe Ryong-hae	
11	Rim Kwang-il		Rim Kwang-il
12	Kim Jae-ryong	Kim Jae-ryong	
13	Kim Jo-guk		
14	Jong Kyong-thaek	Jong Kyong-thaek	
15	Jang Kil-song		Jang Kil-song

**Source:** Created by the author.

**Reference:** NK PRO and North Korea Information Portal of the Unification Ministry.

<Table 3> shows power elites directly or indirectly involved with the military. The four members of the Korean People's Army, who also hold positions in the party, the military, and the administration, are as follows. Ri Pyong-chol is the First Deputy Commander of the Supreme Command in the KPA. Pak Jong-chol is the Chief of General Director of the Reconnaissance General Bureau of the KPA. Jang Kil-song holds the position that ranked between general and lieutenant general in the KPA. Although not included in <Table-3>, Cho Yeon-jun, Cho Yong-won and Park Tae-sung of the Organization & Guidance Department also held senior military posts. The organs and personnel data about the KPA were

significantly less accessible than the WPK and the administration, so it was impossible to pinpoint and contrast all personnel in the military. Therefore, we contrasted with those belonging to the KPA in the North's biographical dictionary of the Unification Ministry.

Following the list of key military elites is my analysis on the organizational changes in North Korean military. The National Defense Commission (NDC) system, which used to be Kim Jong-il's strong support base, is increasingly giving way to the Party Central Military Commission (PCMC). Kim Jong-un convenes a Meeting of the Party Political Bureau and makes important policy decisions.<sup>37</sup> In addition, Kim Jong-un established a State Affairs Commission (SAC) through a constitutional amendment in May 2016 to address the issue between the NDC and the PCMC. The SAC, the executive body of sovereignty, appears to have broader meaning and authority in policy terms than the NDC, which is defined as the highest defense body of sovereignty but has made it clear that it is a peacetime governing body, not a wartime one.

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<sup>37</sup> The Party Congress revised at the Third Plenary Session in 2010 adds a clause that says, 'The General Secretary of the Workers' Party of Korea will be the chairman of the Central Military Commission.'

**<Table 4> Comparison Between the NDC and SAC**

	<b>NDC</b>	<b>SAC</b>
<b>Definition</b>	the supreme defense agency	the supreme policy agency
<b>Mission and Authority</b>	the establishment of the nation's significant policies to carry out the Military-First revolution.	Discussing and determining critical national policies, including defense construction projects
<b>the right of appointment</b>	Appointment or dismissal of key officials in the defense sector	Appointment or dismissal of key officials of the country
<b>wartime</b>	Same as wartime and peacetime	Organization of the NDC (≠ Previous NDC)

**Source:** Lee Sang-sook. "Comparative study on the Party-military relations of Kim Jung-Il's era to that of Kim Jong Un's era: focused on 'Committee of Defense' and 'State Affairs Commission'" *North Korean Studies*14, no.2 (2018), p. 56.

**Notes:** The author compared the Socialist Constitution revised in 1988 with the Socialist Constitution revised in 2016.

These processes may seem like Kim Jong-un's strategy to control the military, but at the same time, this made it more necessary to oversee the military. The symbiotic relationship between the party and the military during the Kim Jong-il era was due to the NDC's strong authority and legitimacy of in support of him and the country's Military-First Policy. However, Kim Jong-un uses the 'legal authority' of normalizing the party because he lacks 'charismatic authority' compared to his father. In other words, normalization ostensibly means a shift from a wartime system to a peacetime system, but virtually a change in the nature of Kim's family leadership's in maintain dictatorship. Yet, this does not mean that North Korean authorities are indifferent to military policies, and they continue to prioritize the military as the backbone of regime stability.

We can ponder two issues regarding Kim Jong-un's strategy to take over the military. One is whether this implicate a sign of instability in Kim Jong-un's powerbase, and the other is how to make of the changes in party-military relations.

It is commonly agreed that the party's normalization and the strengthening of the party's status were salient features during the Kim Jong-un regime. However, there is still a debate over whether it can be seen as an integration between the party and the military or WPK's predominance over the military.<sup>38</sup> Evidences in favor of the latter shows that the changes, as mentioned earlier in the system, strengthened the party's guidance, and the party's organization was filled with Kim Jong-un's closest people. Dose these changes hint a major change upon the North Korean military?

An alternative to the debate is to point out that the relationship between the party and the military is nothing less than strengthening and stabilizing the leader's power. This is in line with arguments that the "normalization" of the Party-state System, or the restoration of the party's authority, could be interpreted as Kim Jong-un's strategy to control the elite. The change in the reorganization of the military and the reshuffles of the military elites have no effect on the essential nature of nuclear weapons and importance of military power in the North Korea. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that there have yet been substantial changes in the North Korean military. Rather, these are again, Kim Jong-un's strategies to strengthen its control, the power elites in particular.

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<sup>38</sup> Kyung-Mo Ahn, "North Korean Politics as a Party-State System: The Dilemma and Change of a Revolutionary Regime", *Asia Research*, vol 59(2), (2016), p. 85.

### **5.1.2. Office No. 39**

How does the narrowness of the winning coalition affect the allocation of resources in North Korea? Basically, in a one-party dictatorship, there exist factions with different interests within the party. A compromise between these factions determines overall resource allocation, economic policy, personnel, or dismissal. However, in a personal dictatorship, the dictator can freely interfere with the financial structure to create a redistribution structure favorable to the loyalists. In the case of large-scale spending such as arms buildup, he may not be restricted.

The issue of allocating resource is indispensable in discussing the relationship between the dictator and the elites who support him. To maintain the dictator's status, dictators must buy off key supporters, and when potential opponents are strong, they must also be willing to veer economic policies that might be in favor of them, at least partially if not completely. Before discussing the actor's game-theoretic aspects, however, what is needed is to look at the North Korean economic system and its characteristics. Doing so is important because this systemic aspect influences resource allocation and subsequent changes in elite organizations.

One notable characteristic of North Korea's economy under the Kim Jong-un regime is the development of markets and the private economy. At the beginning of the regime, questions arose as to whether Kim Jong-un could put the market economy under his control or whether the unintended development of a private economy would be a significant factor shaking the foundation of the dictator's support. While this paper does not make a deterministic conclusion, the growth of private sector seems to serve more to the growth of national and private economies, notably through trade with China, than to undermine Kim Jong-un's

powerbase.

According to Park Yong-ja, North Korea's ruling fund consists of three types.<sup>39</sup> The first is the Central Party Fund earned by Office No 39. The second is loyalty funds to Kim Jong-un from the military, security agencies, foreign-currency-making agencies, and the Cabinet's central institutions for performance, while the third is semi-forced individual loyalty funds.

In particular, the core of North Korea's exploitation system from the perspective of autocratic predatory states is the '*Waku*,' such as licensing rights of import and export for minerals and fisheries and various national licenses. While it is technically the 'people' who own the North Korean economy, Kim Jong-un and his small winning coalition use exclusive resource monopolies extract funds for governance. In other words, the revenue from licensing fees is vital because they are the most crucial foundation of Kim Jong-un's governing funds and a strategic means of balancing elites by redistributing resources to elites.

Ronald Wintrobe divided the economic model under a dictatorship into four categories, of which the Kleptocracy Model describes the redistribution policy of the dictator.<sup>40</sup> The model is that a dictator uses resource redistribution to compensate himself and his loyal supporters adequately. In an ideal-typical communist regime, the Communist Party acts as a distributor of rent, and others struggle to earn this unearned income. As a result, the state's planning bureau is

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<sup>39</sup> Park, Yong Ja. "The System and Function of the Workers' Party of Korea in Kim Jong-un Period: A Study on the Stabilization Strategy of Autocratic Regimes" (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, KINU, 2017, in Korean), p. 255.

<sup>40</sup> Ronald Wintrobe divided the economic models of dictatorships into four categories: kleptocracy, capitalist authoritarianism, the command economy, shadow economy; Ronald Wintrobe, *The political economy of dictatorship*, (Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 131-138.

primarily concerned about redistribution of income rather than normal resource allocation, and market mechanism is permitted only to operate and induce the production and distribute resources.

A Rent-seeking Model is sometimes used to explain North Korea's exploitation economy. Initially, this model appeared to explain the countries' exploitation economy heavily dependent on energy resources due to their abundant oil and gas. Rent occurs when the state wants to restrict free trade and control the market by utilizing exclusive profit mechanisms such as foreign exchange distribution. The North Korean economy can be seen as a rent-based economy, which defines the North as an impoverished regional state, and points to relatively abundant mineral resources and exports. However, since China's direct investment in mineral resources and foreign trade alone does not generate enough foreign currency for government funds, they also involve in illegal activities such as arms exports, drug trafficking, and counterfeit currency.

Office No 39 of the WPK, a leading organization that collects and manages Kim Jong-un's ruling funds, is the North's foreign currency-making agency, *de facto* Ministry of Finance and Accounting of the WPK, and is affiliated with the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the WPK. Office No 39 operates a vast organization of various countries, leadership, trading companies, banks, and businesses throughout North Korea and abroad. As mentioned above, the primary sources of profit include foreign trade and joint ventures, foreign currency shops, foreign currency earning tasks imposed on the people, and drug or arms trafficking.

It is in the context that Park Hyeong-jung claims that there is a relation between a conflict among institutions and Jang's death. In preparation for



hereditary succession to Kim Jong-un, Kim Jong-il sought to strengthen the Suryeong economy by centralizing the foreign currency earnings while limiting the military's trade interests to form an independent economic foundation. However, Kim Jong-un's suspicions began as Jang attempted to expand his own power base and interest. The merging of Office No. 38 and No. 39, presumed to have taken place before 2015, is also believed to have changed the fund management system after Jang was purged.

## **5.2. Reshuffling the Personnel**

On top of military restructuring and political fund reform, Kim Jong-un repeatedly changed elites and bureaucrats, again to solidify his political grip. Previous studies are in line with this analysis.

It is said that Choe Ryong Hae, Hwang Pyong So and Ri Yong Ho were appointed as part of his attempt to bolster Kim Jong-un-led pro-government system and purged Jang Song Thaek, and Hyon Young Chol. The overall change in North Korean officials is arguably a generational shift within the party, government, and the military. At the 7<sup>th</sup> Congress for example, workforce stabilization and renewal plan were proposed in tandem with generation shift. It is noteworthy to point that 70% of members at Party Central Committee (candidate members) were newly selected, outnumbering the counterpart figure from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Conference of Party representatives in 2010.

## Chapter 6. Conclusion

From the discussions so far, we can reach the following conclusions. Kim Jong-un has strengthened his control over the elite by restoring the socialist system's institutional authority, called 'normalization' of the Party-State System. Specifically, it can be said that it used strategies to reduce the size of the actual power elite, increase control, and prevent the formation of independent factions of the elite through frequent reorganization and personnel reshuffles.

Then, was Kim Jong-un's strategy to manage the power elites effective in strengthening leadership and stabilizing the regime? Some say that frequent purges and reorganization are signs of regime instability. However, reducing the winning coalition to prevent certain elite groups from outgrowing. Purging and personnel reshuffles are strategies right out from dictators' textbook.

In Kim Jong-un's case, it is interesting to discover these strategies vis-a-vis the 'normalization' or 'rise' of the Party-State System. Initially, the strengthening of the Party-State System in the socialist system is typically not an exciting option for dictators. Unlike other dictatorships, however, this strategy could have been an option for North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. Arguably, he succeeded in differentiating from his familiar predecessors, boasted a normal state to the international community, and reduce pressure domestically.

Therefore, 'normalization' and 'restoration' of the Party-State System are best understood to conceptualize the change of North Korean politics well. However, it should be clearly distinguished from China and Vietnam's collective leadership system. Normalization in North Korea serves dictator's personal ends.

In other words, it is an abnormal normalization.

From the 8-day long 8<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, held in the midst of double pressure from economic sanctions and COVID-19, we can see that the changes pointed out in this thesis are still on-going. First of all, the number of participants at the convention increased by more than 30% to 5,000, and the number of party representatives at the site nearly doubled from 786 to 1,455.<sup>41</sup> The number of members and alternate members of the Central Committee increased by ten and five, respectively, increased to 250 members of the party's central leadership agency, with 84 re-elections, 34% of whom were in office compared to 2016.

It can be interpreted as an attempt to strengthen Kim Jong-un's power base by strengthening the Party-State System, exemplified in the obviation of Military-First politics from the WPK's protocol and revising it to the People's First Politics.

This study contributes to making better sense of Kim Jong-un's ruling strategy upon the power elite in the unique context of the Party-State System Normalization. However, comparing Kim Jong-un era with that of two father Kims' were a reluctant compromise with the reality. If the Kim Jong-un regime actually lives up to its said goal of a normal state, it is expected that there will be more accessible data regarding the political process, at least more so than that of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il periods, where future researches are recommended to be interested in.

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<sup>41</sup> Jung-chul, Lee, "Evaluation and Prospect of the 8th Party Congress in North Korea," *The 76th Unification Studies Forum* (Seoul National University's Institute for Peace and Unification Studies) (February 2021), pp. 9-10, (in Korean).

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## 국문 초록

### 김정은 정권의 권력 엘리트 통치 전략

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본 연구는 독재정치 이론의 관점에서 김정은의 권력 엘리트 통치 전략 방식을 밝힘과 동시에 당-국가체제의 ‘정상화’라는 북한 정치체제의 변화를 수령의 정권 안정화 도모라는 맥락 속에서 해석하는 것을 목적으로 한다.

북한 연구에서 권력 엘리트에 대한 기존 연구들은 주로 권력 엘리트 개인의 출신성분과 수령과의 연관성 분석을 중심으로 진행되었다. 본 논문은 이러한 기존 연구들이 이론 북한 권력 엘리트에 대한 분석과 자료들을 바탕으로 정권 안정화와 체제 유지를 위해 독재자가 엘리트 연합에 대해 어떠한 전략을 사용하는지 분석하고자 한다. 독재정치 이론은 독재자 이외에도 독재체제를 이루는 행위집단을 구별하여 그 관계의 변화를 통해 독재의 작동원리를 밝힌다는 점에서 유용하다. 그 중에서도 선출인단과 승자연합의 규모 변화, 그리고 통치자와 승자연합의 관계를 통해서 통치자의 정권 유지 전략을 설명하는 부르노 데 메스키타의 선출인단이론을 본 연구의 이론적 논의 기반으로 삼는다.

김정은은 1) 실질적인 권력 엘리트의 규모는 축소시키면서 승자 연합에 대한 자신의 통제력을 높이고, 2) 잦은 조직 및 인사 개편을 통해 권력 엘리트들이 독자적인 파벌을 형성하는 것을 막는 전략을 사용하고 있다. 이러한 전략은 독재자가 충성세력에게 적절한 보상을 제공하고 이권을 재분배하는 것을 용이하게 하기 때문에 독재국가에서 쉽게 찾아볼

수 있는 독재자의 전략이다.

그러나 북한의 김정은은 이러한 독재자의 전략을 당-국가 체제의 정상화라는 제도적 변화와 함께 사용했다. 당-국가체제는 원래 사회주의 정치체제의 가장 일반적이고 기본적인 특징이지만, 북한의 경우에는 체제건설과정과 수령독재체제의 공고화를 거치며 당의 영도보다 수령의 영도가 더 우위에 있어왔다. 김정은은 집권 이후 당-국가체제의 ‘정상화’나 혹은 ‘복원’이라고 불릴 만한 제도적 변화를 피하면서 강화된 당의 권위를 통해서 권력 엘리트에 대한 통제를 강화했다.

본 연구에서는 이처럼 당-국가체제의 ‘정상화’라는 김정은 정권 하에서 나타나는 북한 정치체제의 변화를 사회주의 당-국가체제의 개념 및 수령제와 함께 구축된 북한 체제의 수립 과정 등과 함께 살펴보면서, 결과적으로 이러한 변화들을 정권 안정화와 체제 유지 및 권력 엘리트 통제를 목적으로 한 독재자의 전략적 측면에서 분석한다.

**주요어:** 북한, 김정은, 권력 엘리트, 독재정치 이론, 선출인단 이론, 당-국가체제

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