

North Korea's Domestic Situation Analyzed on the Basis of Kim Jong Un's Public Activity

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Kim Jong Un's 'public activity' is a term coined by external observers that defines any activity of the supreme leader that is covered by North Korea's propaganda media including their newspaper *Rodong Sinmun* (Official Newspaper of the Korea Worker's Party). These activities may include supervising meetings, attending events, watching performances, inspecting the army, leading factories and companies, visiting orphanages, traveling overseas, welcoming a foreign visitor, and many more. Such activities carried out by the supreme leader are crucial for observers who are trying to uncover the reality of the dictatorship.

Within North Korea, Kim Jong Un's activities are referred to as 'revolutionary activities.' More specifically, the ones regarding his frontline inspections of production facilities, military units and the examination of flood damage are called 'local supervision' or 'local studies.' The term 'public activity' that we use includes both concepts of such 'local supervision' or 'local studies,' but 'revolutionary activities' are not entirely included. For example, the *Rodong Sinmun* introduces Kim Jong Un's foreign involvement, the exchange of congratulatory messages, and discourse introductions as part of his 'revolutionary activities' but those are not considered to be a part of 'public activities,' as no direct involvement of the leader himself is to be found.

Kim Jong Un was not involved in any public activities for 20 days in April 2020. Vanishing after presiding the party's political bureau conference on April 11th, his next appearance was on May 1st at the opening ceremony of the Suncheon Phosphatic Fertilizer Factory. When he did not show up to pay his respects at the Kumsusan Palace like he does every other year on his grandfather Kim Il Sung's birthday on April 15th, rumors of medical surgery and accidents emerged in the media of South Korea and the West. Although Kim Jong Un resumed his activities on May 1st, him not paying his respects to his grandfather and him vanishing temporarily, hint at possible health problems.

Especially since the start of this year, Kim Jong Un's public activities, that serve as important evidence towards interpreting North Korea's internal affairs, showed a few unique characteristics. First, the frequency of such activities declined significantly compared to any other year. Second, even though this is the case, small-scale meetings of the party were called more often than usual. The meetings were focused on the management of the COVID-19 pandemic and the control of executive officers'

indiscipline. In addition to that, the number of construction projects was decreased, while Kim Jong Un increasingly expressed his frustration towards his subordinates.

Kim Jong Un's Public Activities of 2020 Decreased by Half Compared to Other Years

Throughout the first half of 2020, Kim Jong Un participated in only 19 public activities, which means that his public activity was limited to just 3 different moves per month. Compared to 2013 when he participated in 100 activities, and to 2017~2019 where he continuously engaged in 40~50 activities in the first half of each year, this year's statistics show a significant decrease. The reasons behind this rapid decrease in Kim Jong Un's public presence were not clearly explained but concerns regarding his health are growing due to the possibility of an infection with Covid-19 and his general health conditions due to his obesity. Ever since Covid-19 started spreading in January, North Korea strictly closed its borders and also limited internal movements amongst its citizens. With such circumstances, it is possible that North Korean government officials believed that the citizens would understand Kim Jong Un's decreased activity in local inspections and his slightly increased laziness.

However, the number of activities increased to 8 in the month of July including the worshipping at the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun on the day before Kim Il Sung's date of death (07.08), presiding church conferences three times, celebrating the events of 'The Day of Victory in the Great Fatherland Liberation War, where the Korean Armistice Agreement was signed (07.27)' twice, and visiting construction sites twice. In August, the number of public activities decreased back to two with Kim Jong Un presiding the party's state of affairs conference (08.05) and inspecting areas affected by the flood (08.06). It is still unknown whether the increase in the number of public activities in July was a result of external media sources' reporting of 'Kim Jong Un's rapid decrease in activity' or the decline in concern regarding the coronavirus. It is, however, most likely that Kim Jong Un will increase the number of public activities with the upcoming 75th anniversary of the party.

For reference, the following describes Kim Jong Un's patterns of public activities over the 8 years of him being in power. Throughout the first 4 years of ruling, the numbers remained between 150~210 per year, which is 2~3 times more than what Kim Jong Il did in his early days in office (70~90 times a year). The numbers peaked in 2013 with 212 activities and started to steadily decrease after that with just 80~90 appearances per year throughout 2017~2019. There was an overall increase in activities in areas of the military and the economy, where the focus was on economics when foreign environments were favorable, and on the military when they worsened. Public activities were focused on the economy when the global political economy was more open towards North Korea and on the military, when foreign relations were hostile. For instance, Kim Jong Un focused more on engaging in military activities in 2017, when North Korea focused on increasing their

nuclear capabilities, while focusing more on activities in the economic sector in 2018 after the denuclearization negotiations with the US.

Frequent Small-scale Party Meetings (9 times), Emphasis on Preventing COVID-19 and the Establishment of the System’s Discipline

Another characteristic regarding this year’s public activities is the high frequency of party conferences that were limited to a maximum of 10 crucial executive members. Up until August 15th, Kim Jong Un held 5 extended political bureau meetings, 3 extended Central Military Commission meetings (including the primary meeting), and 1 Political Affairs Assembly meeting, which all adds up to a total of 9 small-scale party meetings. As shown in Graph 1, Kim Jong Un previously had an average of only 3 small-scale party meetings each year.

<Graph 1> Frequency of Kim Jong Un’s Calling of Small-scale Party Meetings Throughout 2011~2020.8.15

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Political Bureau Meetings	3	4	4	1	3	/	/	1	1	5
Military Affairs Meetings	/	/	2	2	3	/	/	1	2	3
Political Affairs Meetings	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	1
Subtotal	3	4	6	3	6	0	0	2	3	9

* Table by author. Statistics up until 2020.8.15

There were new small-scale party meetings introduced over the course of this year: the political bureau’s ‘emergency meeting,’ the Central Military Commission’s ‘primary meeting (video conference),’ and the Political Affairs meeting. The party’s Central Military Commission called emergency meetings on two occasions: on August 20th, 2015, when North Korea came close to declaring war, and on September 6th, 2019, when the military was officially included in typhoon prevention measures. On July 25th of this year the political bureau called an emergency meeting for the first time to block the Kaesong area. On June 23rd the Central Military Commission called a primary meeting for the first time to end threatening behaviors against South Korea.

The title ‘Political Affairs Meetings’ was first introduced by the Vice Chairmen of the Political Affairs Assembly. This meeting included Kim Jong Un, 8 Vice Chairmen.

During this meeting the new construction of the Central Committee facilities and problems with the distribution of the due to the COVID-19 lockdown extremely limited food resources were discussed. This meeting is believed to have a similar structure to that of past Political Affairs Responsible Workers' (Central Committee Secretary) Meeting. The Central Committee's Secretary position was renamed to Vice-Chairman, and the Secretary Bureau was changed into the Government Affairs Bureau on May 2016 during the 7th Party Congress.

In the beginning of his term, Kim Jong Un called for small-scale meetings in order to discuss the direction of state affairs with the party's executive members due to his lack of experience. However, calling in small scale meetings may now be a strategic measure to convey to the public that he continues his efforts during the pandemic and to directly give orders to important executive members. During the pandemic, North Korea started using modern technology like video conferences.

Graph 2 provides an overview of this years' discussion topics for each meeting. Out of the 5 Political Bureau Meetings, 4 of them were to discuss the response to COVID-19, and all 3 Military Affairs Meetings were used to discuss the problem of how to strengthen military deterrence. In addition to that, the topic of how to establish discipline among the executive members, as well as the challenges in managing public sentiment were discussed five times. Apart from that, there were specific topics discussed during specific meetings: the criticism of the structure of privileges for executive members and the strengthening of the party's hierarchy (02.29), the challenges for the security of Pyongyang's citizens (06.07), the problem of how to strengthen the party's culture among executive members (07.18), the problem strengthening society's organizational discipline (07.25), and the standardization process for the evaluation of businesses through government executives (08.05). These topics suggest that the establishment of discipline among executive members of the party, the government and the military, the ensurance of a secure life for North Korean citizens, as well as the tightening of control over people whose discipline towards following the social norms decreased among all levels of the hierarchy within north Korea.

<Graph 2> North Korea's Meetings Throughout January and August 2020

Title of Meeting	Topic of Discussion
2.29 Political Bureau Extended Meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o "Realization of "People Number One" and Strengthening the Party's Rank System" o "Problems with Fulfilling Urgent Political, Military, and Economic Tasks" o COVID-19 Prevention Measures o HR Department: Dismissed Ri Man Kun, Director of KWP's Department of Organization and Guidabce and Park Tae Duk, KWP's Vice Chairman in charge of Agriculture from Office due to 'Privileged Manner'

4.11 Political Bureau Extended Meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o New COVID-19 Disease Control Measures o 2019 Budget Execution and 2020 Budget Planning o Discussion of Executive Problems for Submission to the Supreme People's Assembly o Structural Changes: (2019.12 Promotion to Chief of General Staff) to Political Office, Ri Sun Kwon, Secretary for Foreign Affairs in Early January) and Kim Yo Jong (Deputy Minister in December) Elected For Candidate of the Political Bureau
4.12 Supreme People's Assembly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Kim Jong Un Did Not Attend o Approval of Pre-End Closing o Appointment of Ri Sin Kwon and Kim Hyung Jun, Substitution of Partial Cabinet Officers o Approval of laws.
5.24 Central Military Commission Extended Meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Kim Jong Un Mentions "Strengthening Nuclear Deterrence and Operation of High Strategic Force Under Turbulent State"
6.7 Political Bureau Meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Problems with Improvements of the Chemical Industry and Guarantee of Civic Life in Pyongyang o Revision of Current Party Regulations o Addressing Structural Problems; Elected Multiple Military Generals as Candidates of the Central Committee
6.23 Central Military Commission Primary Meeting (Video Conference)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Review of Proposals Regarding Main Military Policies. Reviewed Documents Regarding Solutions for Strengthening War Deterrence o Put a Hold on Military Plans Against South Korea Proposed by the General Staff
7.2 Political Bureau Extended Meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Summation of Business Regarding Infectious Disease Control for the Past 6 Months and Discussion of Strengthening the Country's Emergency Infection Division. Kim Jong Un Criticized the Executives' Inattention and Violation of Disinfection Policies. o Problems with Accelerating the Construction of the Pyongyang General Hospital o Examination of Important Problems Regarding the Party's Foreign Business
7.18 Central Military Commission Extended Meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Problems with Strengthening the Military Executives' Refinement and Leadership o Structural Problems (Unknown) o Problems regarding 'Strengthening War Deterrence' (Private Meeting) o Approval of Important Military Production Plan Indicators
7.25 Political Bureau Emergency Extended Meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Regarding "7.19 Virus Infected Runaway from Vietnam to the Kaesong Area" o Complete Lockdown of Kaesong City on 7.24 Afternoon, Changing the National Emergency Infection System into the Maximum Emergency System o "Secure Consistent Structural Rules, Action, and Principles Across Entire Party and Society"
8.5 Political Affairs Meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Improvement of Central Party Department Facilities and Executives' Structural System o Government Executives' Evaluation of Structured Business and Problems with Establishing Measures o Problems with the Special Support System of Food Supplies and Funds for Kaesong

[This Year's Decrease in Construction Business and Increase in Kim Jong Un's Expression of Frustration](#)

Although Kim Jong Un declared ‘head-on confrontation’ in a plenary meeting last December, he pushed back unnecessary business and adjusted the goal of expanding an independent economy. No processes are speeding up even with the 75th anniversary of the party’s establishment coming up. With that being said, Kim Jong Un’s weak internal business management is another characteristic of this year’s public activity.

On March 17th, Kim Jong Un stated that the construction of the Pyongyang General Hospital would be “completed within 200 days”, in time for the 75th anniversary of the party’s establishment (10.10), and that “other constructions planned for this year will be pushed back.” In the Political Bureau’s meeting on June 7th, the improvement of the chemical industry and the improvement of the life of Pyongyang citizens were chosen as the main goals based on discussions about the independent economy and the lives of North Korean citizens. Compared to past declarations about electricity, coal, metal and railroads - the four main advanced industry sectors - or the overall citizen life improvement, the current goals are more reduced and adjusted. The ‘70-day battle’ was not developed even with the upcoming 75th anniversary, and the ‘5-year strategy of economic development (2016~2020)’, which was continuously emphasized last year, was not even mentioned recently.

Such trends prove that North Korea’s economic situation has worsened. The prolonged economic sanctions of the international community caused North Korea’s decline in exports, decrease in financial reserves. In addition to that, the contraction of the entire market that followed the COVID-19 pandemic added on to the shortage of all production activities. The heavy downpour in the Hwanghaedo area also had a huge impact on the production of grains. Kim Jong un ordered to overlook the heavy water damage situation in the Eunpa County , Hwangbuk and distribute ‘Emergency Grain’ (8.7).

Meanwhile, North Korea’s propaganda media often covered Kim Jong Un’s expression of frustration during local inspections and towards executives during meetings. At the Pyongyang General Hospital construction site (07.20), Kim Jong Un ordered a change of directors after stating that “the Vice President of the Construction Association is not staying in budget and is thereby leading the economic structure as he wishes. By encouraging multiple support businesses, he is putting pressure on citizens and ruining the party’s reputation.” The media also showed the leaders Park Bong ju and Prime Minister Kim Jae Ryong standing up and receiving extra directions from Kim Jong Un at the scene. On July 2nd, during a Political Bureau meeting regarding the spread of COVID-19, Kim Jong Un criticized the ignorance of executive officers. There was an increase in the number of times Kim Jong Un made use of his absolute power.

In conclusion, by examining North Korea’s internal state of affairs over the past eight months through the evaluation of Kim Jong Un’s public activities, it can be said that the damage from prolonged economic sanctions and the COVID-19 pandemic was doubled up with the flood damage, all of which negatively impacted that already struggling economy. Kim Jong Un is managing public sentiment through control policies based on the dissatisfaction of citizens and military executives. Throughout that process, Kim Jong

Un's dictatorship is evolving into a more autocratic state, led by his strict authoritarian regime.