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Personalist Dictatorship and Political Roles of the Military in North Korea

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North Korea remains the only communist country that has successfully completed three-generation hereditary successions—from Kim Il-sung (1948–1994) to Kim Jong-il (1997–2011) and Kim Jong-un (2011–present)—without any noticeable political turmoil during leadership alternations. The North Korean case is an empirical anomaly in the world of dictatorial regimes because hereditary successions are uncommon and mostly unsuccessful in modern nonmonarchic regimes. According to Brownlee, between 1946 and 2006, there were only nine cases of successful family succession out of 258 total autocratic transitions; 196 of these cases were constrained by political parties or forcefully removed, while 53 were nonhereditary autocratic transitions.[1] Out of the nine successful cases, five autocratic regimes are currently ruled by the second generation from the same family. North Korea is the only nonmonarchic autocratic state that has maintained a three-generation rule.

[1] Jason Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

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Since the inauguration of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) in 1948, Pyongyang's political system was transformed from a Muscovite totalitarian communist party-state to a personalist dictatorship with "a strong tendency toward familial power and dynastic succession."[2] Huntington notes that North Korea (like Romania) "started out as a one-party system but by the 1980s had evolved into a sultanistic personal dictatorship."[3] Personalist regimes have been found to be inherently unstable due to their innate regime characteristics, such as a dictator's political whim; decay of political institutions, including the political party; lack of political legitimacy and excessive dependence on the means of physical violence; and absence of social inclusion mechanisms, not to mention a lack of established leadership succession rules.[4]

However, North Korea has escaped the above-mentioned vulnerabilities of personalist regimes in a time of multiple internal and external crises since the 1990s, including diplomatic isolation, economic downturn massive famine, and the death of Kim Il-sung who built the state and the system with his own Juche ideology and personal charisma. Almost three decades after the founding father's death, the Pyongyang regime still appears resilient and reveals no signs of political turmoil. Given that the regime collapse in Pyongyang seems improbable through elite opposition, organized popular protests, or foreign intervention, the Korean People's Army (KPA) may be the only political force that poses an immediate threat to the Kim family regime.

This article examines the political influence and roles played by the KPA from 1948 to the early 1970s, in which the Pyongyang regime transformed from a totalitarian communist party state to a personalist regime with dynastic succession. This article

[2] Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 52.
[3] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), p. 112.
[4] Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition*; H. E. Chehabi and Juan J. Linz, eds., *Sultanistic Regimes* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Brownlee, *Authoritarianism*; Jennifer Gandhi and Adam Przeworski, "Authoritarian Institutions and the Survival of Autocrats," *Comparative Political Studies* 40, no. 11 (2007): 1279-1301; Alexandre Y. Mansourov, "Emergence of the Second Republic: The Kim Regime Adapts to the Challenges of Modernity," in *North Korea: The Politics of Regime Survival,* eds. Young Whan Kihl and Hong Nak Kim (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2006), pp. 37-58; Jin-ha Kim, "Crisis of Succession: Mapping the Paths Into and Out of the Personalistic Dictatorship in North Korea," *EAI Asia Security Initiative*, Workshop Paper, no.p. 20 (2011); Milan W. Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

advances three main arguments. First, it argues that the KPA's self-defined mission evolved from the people's army (1948–1950s) to the party's army (1960s) and to the Kim family's army (since 1970s). Second, such changes in the KPA's role were established in the process of Kim Il-sung's political rise, struggles with rival factions, and establishment of a personalist dictatorship in North Korea. Finally, the regime resilience in Pyongyang is largely due to the KPA's unwavering loyalty to the Kim family rule that was built in the political transitions from state-building to the 1970s. The KPA's unwavering loyalty to the young and inexperienced leadership of Kim Jong-un is an outcome of the armed forces' self-defined mission as the defender of Kim Il-sung and his successors.

The following section explains the main characteristics of, and vulnerabilities innate in, a personalist dictatorship; in particular, the role of the military in the regime's survival. Section two details the personalist tendencies peculiar to the case of North Korea. Sections three to five explain how Kim Il-sung's political rise moulded the KPA's self-defined missions and its role in domestic politics from state-building to the 1970s. The article concludes with speculations about how the KPA's political roles continue to function in the current Kim Jong-un regime.

Personalise Regime and Regime (In)stability

Almost a half-century after the *third wave* of democratization swept across the continents, authoritarian dictatorships are still prevalent, accounting for nearly 40 percent of the world's countries.[5] Those dictatorial regimes tend to develop personalist tendencies, centralizing political power at the hands of one person and degeneration of political institutions.[6] As numerous empirical studies point out, personalist regimes are relatively unstable, vulnerable, and prone to political crises due to institutional decay, power succession problems, and whims and unpredictability in decision-making and implementation. Personalist dictatorships have become an increasingly common occurrence in the dictatorial political world in the twenty-first century.

[5] Charles Boix, Michael Miller, and Sebastian Rosato, "A Complete Data Set of Political Regimes, 1800-2007," *Comparative Political Studies* 46, no. 12 (2013): pp. 1523-1554.
[6] Barbara Geddes, "What Do We Know about Democratization after Twenty Years?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 2 (1999): 115-144; Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz, "Autocratic Breakdown and Regime Transitions: A New Data Set," *Perspectives on Politics* 12, no. 2 (2014): pp. 313-331.

Personalist dictatorship is one of numerous distinct forms of dictatorship. Geddes once classified authoritarian dictatorships into five distinct forms—single-party rule, military rule, monarchy, personalist rule, and hybrid—but later elaborated further into seven regime types of dictatorship.[7] The most extreme form of personalism is Max Weber's conceptualization of sultanism, a regime that arises "whenever traditional domination develops an administration and a military force which are purely personal instruments of the matter…."[8] Linz and Stepan advance Weber's definition to suggest that "the private and the public are fused, there is a strong tendency toward military power and dynastic succession … the ruler acts only according to his own unchecked discretion…."[9]

Personalist rule as a subtype of autocracy should be treated as a regime trait rather than a distinct form of an authoritarian regime, due to varying levels of personalism, ruling ideology, concentration of power, and the dictator's relationship with key political institutions (e.g., political party, military leadership, politburo, etc.).[10] Some personalist regimes heavily utilize official ideologies for regime legitimacy, such as North Korea's Juche or *Songun* (military-first) ideology and the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) utilization of nationalism, patriotism, and Confucianism. Some personalist dictators depend on the military's support for regime survival, such as South Korea's Park Jung-hee dictatorship until 1979, the Philippines under Marcos' rule until 1986, and Indonesia's Suharto regime until 1998. Moreover, depending on a regime's precedent political legacies, it can be a personalist rule with totalitarian tendencies (strong party and official state ideology) or a personalism with authoritarian tendencies (weak or no party and no ideology).[11] One defining characteristic of personalism, however, is the increasing centralization of power and decision-making in one person at the expense of official political institutions and guiding state ideology that transcends a dictator's reign.

Despite the diverse spectrum of personalism in the political world, one empirical commonality is that those regimes are inherently unstable, frequently face political challenges either from the ruling elite circle or popular protests, and, in many cases, short-

[7] Geddes, "What Do We Know About Democratization"; Geddes et al., "Authoritarian Breakdown."
[8] Max Weber, *Economy and Society, New ed*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).
[9] Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition*, p. 52.
[10] Geddes, et al., "Authoritarian Breakdown"; Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*.
[11] Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition*, p. 52.

lived. Numerous empirical studies demonstrate that personalist regimes depend on excessive repression of the populace for regime survival,[12] have a higher probability of coup d'état than other autocratic regimes, are more likely to enter into civil war or interstate conflict than other regime types,[13] and therefore experience shorter regime duration than others.[14] When a regime's transition from personalism occurs, it is done mostly via regime collapse (not through political negotiations) and therefore entails frequent political violence.[15]

Such instability of personalist rule emanates from the ways the personalist dictator controls major political institutions and the populace. Scholarship in authoritarian dictatorship identifies the twin problems intrinsic to authoritarianism, i.e., the problems of authoritarian power-sharing and authoritarian control, which determine the longevity of dictatorial regimes.[16] Authoritarian power-sharing refers to the ways in which a dictator deals with a ruling coalition that supports him and guarantees regime survival; authoritarian control deals with regulating the populace through repression and cooptation. Further, personalist autocracies are frequently short-lived because personalism engenders "blatant failure of authoritarian power-sharing" and "heavy reliance on repression" by using the military to result in the dictator's dependence on the repressive agents and military officers' political influence.[17] Svolik's empirical study shows that, out of 316 dictators between 1946–2008, 205 were dethroned by regime insiders, while only 62 lost power due to popular uprising or public pressure. In a similar vein, Gandhi and Przeworski identify the same problem that authoritarian dictators face: threats from within the ruling elite and threats from outsiders in society.[18] The authors find that the key to authoritarian longevity is the presence of a legislative branch that offers "internal rules that regulate the prerogatives of power."[19] A single party becomes an instrument by which the dictator establishes political logic and legitimacy for his rule.

[12] Christian Davenport, "State Repression and the Tyrannical Peace," *Journal of Peace Research* 44, no. 4 (2007): pp. 485-504.
[13] Jessica L. Weeks, *Dictators at War and Peace* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).
[14] Geddes, "What Do We Know about Democratization"; Geddes et al., "Authoritarian Breakdown."
[15] Geddes et al., "Authoritarian Breakdown."
[16] Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*.
[17] Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian* Rule, pp. 6-10.
[18] Gandhi & Przeworski, "Authoritarian Institutions."
[19] Gandhi and Przeworski, "Authoritarian Institutions," p. 1283.

Studies of authoritarian survival reveal political instability and the frequent downfall of personalist dictatorships. Personalist rules bring about excessive centralization of political power in one person and corrosion of political institutions in general and political parties and legislatures in particular, degenerating, thus "authoritarian power-sharing into personal autocracy."[20] Moreover, since the personalist rule does not have logic and mechanisms for legitimizing political decisions, one person increasingly depends on coercive institutions, most frequently the armed forces, which can monopolize the means of physical violence in society. In most cases, however, excessive dependence on the military turns out to be costly and not always effective enough to manage the dictatorial power. Personalist dictators' dependence on the military for regime survival often results in military coups and the collapse of the dictatorship. The political crisis becomes even more likely when the dictator's sudden death creates the problem of power succession. In sum, personalist dictatorships are inherently unstable, short-lived, and prone to military coups.[21]

Personalist Dictatorship in Pyongyang

Although North Korea was inaugurated in 1948 as a Muscovite-style communist party state, its political structure steadily moved away from it and shifted toward a personalist dictatorship. Such a transition is unusual in the world of communist regimes. The Soviet Union, Pyongyang's closest patron state, quickly transitioned from Stalin's personality cult to a party-centered system after Khrushchev denounced his predecessor. Similarly, Communist China, another patron state for North Korea, came out of Mao's personality cult after Deng Xiaoping came to power in 1979. Likewise, most communist regimes have slowly transitioned from totalitarianism to post-totalitarianism with growing institutional pluralism (albeit not social pluralism), bureaucratization, weakened

[20] Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*, 7.

[21] Jonathan Powell, "Determinants of the Attempting and Outcome of Coups d'etat," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56, no. 6 (2012): 1017-pp. 1040; Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*; Jessica L. Weeks, "Strongmen and Straw Men: Authoritarian Regimes and the Initiation of International Conflict," *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 2 (2012): pp. 326-347; Gandhi and Przeworski, "Authoritarian Institutions"; Juan Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2000).

commitment to the utopian ideology, and ineffective mobilization of the populace.[22] In contrast, Pyongyang's political transition went through a unique path through which the party-centered system switched to a one-man dictatorship with Kim Il-sung as the undisputed leader with his own Juche ideology that replaced previous Marxism-Leninism as the official state ideology. The personality cult expanded into a family cult for hereditary power succession to his son Kim Jong-il who was officially pronounced successor at the Sixth Party Congress in 1980.

Pyongyang's political system signifies a personalist dictatorship in three distinctive areas: personality (and family) cult; Juche ideology; and the relationship between the leader and political institutions (in particular, the party and the military). The first prominent characteristic of personalism in North Korea is the excessive personality cult of Kim Il-sung. A personality cult is a common occurrence in most totalitarian and personalist regimes, as a dictator is often praised and eulogized for his charisma and unmistakable leadership and intuition, as were the cases for Stalin and Mao. However, the personality cult in North Korea takes it one step further to create a family cult that glorifies Kim Il-sung's ancestors, his wife, son, and grandson with the myth of the "Baekdu bloodline." The family cult is reminiscent of the traditional Confucius teaching of filial piety (called *hyo*).[23] Oftentimes, North Korea's propaganda depicts Kim Il-sung as a compassionate father and Kim Jong-il as a benevolent mother who cares for the nation as an extended family.[24] Kim Il-sung's dictatorship took the personality cult to its extreme in its form and intensity.

The second characteristic of personalism relates to North Korea's state ideology of Juche. One of the crucial elements of a totalitarian system is the heavy utilization of official state ideology that mobilizes the populace for utopian sociopolitical construction. Once the state ideology is established, it heavily restrains the party's and the leaders' political and policy choices. In North Korea, however, the Juche ideology was first introduced in the late 1950s to consolidate Kim Il-sung's political and policy lines, which are independent of the Soviet Union and China. Juche's anti-factionalism provided

[22] Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition*; Patrick McEachern, *Inside the Redbox: North Korea's Post-Totalitarian Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).
[23] Paul French, *North Korea: State of Paranoia* (New York: Zed Books, 2014), p. 60.
[24] Bruce B. Cumings, "The Corporate State in North Korea," in *State and Society in Contemporary North Korea*, ed. Hagen Koo (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 209.

justification for Kim Il-sung's purges of rival factions—the Soviet, the Yanan, and South Korean groups—in the KWP in the 1950s. At the same time, the ideology's anti-imperialism glorified Kim and his guerrilla group's heroic war with Japan and depicted Kim as the defender of the state and the people against arch-enemies in Japan and the United States.[25] Moreover, Kim Jong-il utilized his father's Juche ideology for his political power by glorifying his father's heroic leadership through making of art and movies at the Propaganda and Agitation Department and his writing the "Ten Principles for the Establishment of the Juche Idea." In glorifying his father's and his fellow guerrilla group's heroism, Kim Jong-il came to possess the sole entitlement to interpret Juche. The ideology did not constrain the Kim family regime's decisions; contrariwise, the family utilized the ideology for its political expediency and familial power succession.

The third feature of personalism in Pyongyang is the leader's relationship with the political institutions, i.e., the party and the military. In a totalitarian party-state, the party is the highest political and ideological authority that "assumes a vanguard role in the proletarian dictatorship and defines the direction of government policy."[26] The party elects the leader and provides legitimacy to him. In North Korea, however, the leader–party relationship is reversed so that the party (and the military) becomes a legitimate political authority only through the leader's recognition. This becomes evident when one examines Kim Jong-il's Songun politics, which brought the KPA to the forefront of his rule at the expense of the party's authority and decision-making power. Kim quickly switched Pyongyang's political system from the party-state to one dominated by the military; by the same token, Kim Jong-un quickly reversed his father's Songun legacy and returned to the party-centered political system. In Pyongyang, political institutions are expedient tools for the Kim family rule.

In many ways, the North Korean political system is an archetype of personalist dictatorship—and, as such, Pyongyang's political system must be prone to instability and frequently face threats of regime collapse, as are other personalist regimes around the world. As mentioned, successful hereditary successions in nonmonarchic regimes are rare; three-generation family succession is nonexistent, except for the case of North Korea.

[25] Sung Chul Yang, *The North and South Korean Political Systems: A Comparative Analysis* (Westview Press, 1994), p. 224.
[26] Jongseok Woo, "Songun Politics and the Political Weakness of the Military in North Korea: An Institutional Account," *Problems of Post-Communism* 63, no. 4 (2016): p. 256.

Although the first hereditary succession is successful, the second family succession to grandchild becomes extremely challenging because the first hereditary succession intensifies personalist tendencies and aggravates institutional decay so that the third-generation successor must rely purely on his own individual capacity.[27] Moreover, threats to the personalist regime come from two fronts: the ruling coalition and the populace.[28] However, since the ordinary people in North Korea are tightly controlled by multiple agents and layers of surveillance and repression, an immediate threat to the Kim family regime may come from the inner ruling circle and, in particular, the KPA, which is best organized and monopolizes physical violence.

One puzzling reality in Pyongyang is that the KPA remains the bulwark of the Kim family regime's security and has shown unwavering loyalty to the dictator throughout its history in different political settings. The KPA's role as the defender of the Kim family rule transcends North Korea's political changes from Kim Il-sung's power struggles with rival factions in the 1950s, personalist rule and power succession to Kim Jong-il in the 1970s, Kim Jong-il's Songun politics from 1998 to 2011, and Kim Jong-un's purge of KPA leadership and return to the party-centered political system since 2011. This article argues that the military's unwavering loyalty to the Kim family rule originated from the KPA's self-defined mission that was deeply entrenched through the power struggles in the 1950s and 1960s. From the state-building to the 1970s, North Korean politics went through three distinct stages of political shifts, from power struggles by multiple factions in the 1950s, purge of factions and installment of the party-state that was dominated by Kim's guerrilla faction in the 1960s, and Kim's personalist dictatorship since the 1970s. The KPA's self-defined mission and political identity were formed in parallel with such political changes, from the people's army in the 1950s to the party's army in the 1960s and the Kim family's army since the late 1960s. The KPA's resolute allegiance in the post-Kim Il-sung era is explained by such political legacies from the mid-twentieth century. The ensuing sections detail North Korea's political shifts from 1948 through the 1970s in which the KPA's self-defined missions progressed in tandem with such political changes.

[27] Kim, "Crisis of Succession," p. 3.
[28] Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*; Gandhi and Przeworski, "Authoritarian Institutions,"; Geddes, "What Do We Know."

State-Building and the Power Struggles (1945–1958): The People's Army

North Korea was inaugurated in 1948 under the occupation and supervision of the Soviet military so the political, military, and ideological systems were a mere reflection of Moscow's political will. Further political progress in Pyongyang, however, was largely independent of the choice of the Soviet Union. North Korea established current politico-military systems and ideology throughout two decades of power struggles among different factions during and after the Korean War (1950–1953). Although Kim Il-sung was a prominent political figure in the post-colonial state-building period and acquired support from the Soviet military's occupation forces, historical records indicate that Kim was certainly not the most prominent leader in Pyongyang. After liberation from Japan in 1945, various communist forces vied for political power in the northern half of Korea, i.e., at least five main faction groups competed for hegemony. The first group of communist leaders was indigenous communists, called the "domestic group," which operated underground during the Japanese colonial period. The second was a group of Korean communists based in China, called the "Yanan group," which organized armed revolutionaries in Northeastern China. The third was Soviet Koreans who returned from the Soviet Union to Korea with the Soviet military but did not actively participate in the anti-Japanese independence movement. The fourth group was the South Korean communist group, which operated in Seoul until 1948. Finally, Kim Il-sung's Manchurian guerrilla group (including the Gapsan group), waged an anti-Japanese independence guerrilla war in the 1930s and 1940s.[29]

Kim Il-sung returned to Pyongyang in September 1945, roughly one month after Japan surrendered, not as an independence war hero but as a captain of the Soviet Army, which quickly occupied and controlled the northern half of the peninsula. Although Kim was anointed by Moscow as the leader of Pyongyang, his actual political domination took much more time and came after intense power struggles with other competing factions. In particular, Kim's political weakness was more prominent in the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) than in the Korean People's Army (KPA). A more prominent communist leader was Pak Hon-yong who organized the Joseon Communist Party (JCP) Reconstruction Committee immediately after Japan's surrender. The JCP was headquartered in Seoul,

[29] Glenn D. Page and Dong Jun Lee, "The Post-War Politics of Communist Korea," *China Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (1963): 19-20.

South Korea, which was under American military occupation, and the Rhee Syngman government, which was staunch anticommunist and had severely persecuted communists from its inception. The Soviet occupation force sponsored a communist party convention in Pyongyang to establish the JCP's Northern Branch. The convention elected the first secretary (Kim Yong-bom), the second secretary (Oh Gi-sop), and the 17-member executive committee.[30] Kim Il-sung was one of the 17 executive committee members; one year later, Kim was elected one of two vice chairs of the JCP-Northern Branch (along with Chu Yong-ha, from the domestic group) and kept the position until 1949. At the same time, Kim's guerrilla faction members' influence in the party was also limited: the Central Committee of the party elected 43 members, which included only four from Kim's faction, 12 from the Yanan group, 14 from the domestic group, and eight from the Soviet-Koreans, and five from others.[31]

However, Kim was able to quickly expand his political power base due to three main reasons. The first and most immediate source of Kim's power was Moscow's support for him as the leader of communist North Korea. Soviet Army Commander Andreri Romanenko commended him as "the paramount patriot who had heroically fought against Japanese imperialists."[32] The Soviet military appointed Kim as chair of the Provisional People's Committee in 1946, which enabled him to expand his connections with indigenous communist leaders across North Korea. The second reason for Kim's political rise was the fact that the JCP was headquartered in Seoul, which was under American military occupation, and most of the prominent party leaders operated in the south.[33] This allowed Kim to quickly expand his influence in the northern half of the peninsula.

Still, the most important political asset for Kim was his 200-strong guerrilla members who played crucial roles in creating the KPA. Although the KPA was officially pronounced in February 1948, indigenous armed forces had been formed much earlier.

[30] Yangmo Ku, Inyeop Lee, and Jongseok Woo, *Politics in North and South Korea: Political Development, Economy, and Foreign Relations* (London: Routledge, 2018), p. 112.
[31] Dae-sook Suh, *Kim Il Sung: The North Korean Leader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988),p. 80.
[32] Ku, Lee, and Woo, *Politics in North and South Korea*, p .113.
[33] Andrei Lankov, *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 5; Kongdan Oh and Ralph C. Hassig, *North Korea Through the Looking Glass* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 2000), p. 83.

Immediately after the Japanese surrender, various political forces, both nationalists and communists, organized their own defence forces to fill the power vacuum from Japan's withdrawal and provide security for the people. However, Soviet military commander General Chischakov pronounced a decree on October 12, 1945, in which all armed organizations were disbanded and submitted all weapons to the authorities. One month later, General Chischakov organized a 2,000-man police force, along with the railroad guard with a 13 company-level force.[34] Subsequently, the Pyongyang Academy was established to educate military officers, with Kim Chaek, one of Kim Il-sung's closest faction members, principal of the academy. Subsequently, the Security Guard Academy was also established to train midlevel army officers, which became the predecessor to the Korean People's Army. When the KPA was officially launched in February 1948, all leadership positions were filled with Kim Il-sung's guerrilla group, including Choi Yong-geon (supreme commander of the KPA), Kim Il (commander of the Department of Culture), Ahn Gil (general chief of staff), Kim Il (culture commander), Choe Hyon (First Division Commander), and Kang Kon (chief of general staff); the only exception was Mu Chong (commander of the Artillery Division) from the Yanan faction.[35] Within the KPA, the only faction that could challenge Kim's hegemony was the Yanan faction, which included Kim Won-bong, Mu Chong, and Pak Il-u, but the Soviet occupation force swiftly disarmed them as soon as they returned from China.[36] The Kim Il-sung faction's dominance in the KPA became the most crucial asset for Kim Il-sung's political power base throughout the 1950s, especially when he was engaged in power struggles with the rival factions.

The KPA's self-defined mission during the early years of state-building was largely shaped by Kim Il-sung's political position, i.e., weakness in the party but dominance in the military. As a result, Kim's priority was to keep the two institutions separate so that the military could stay away from the factional struggles within the KWP. Kim Il-sung asserted that the KPA "was created based on the Soviet socialist principles and its rich historical experiences," confirming that the KPA was built based on the tenets of Marxism and Leninism.[37] The KWP Central Committee meeting held in December 1946

[34] Jang, Joon-ik, *History of the Korean People's Army* (Seoul: Seomundang, 1991) (in Korean).
[35] Ku, Lee, and Woo, *Politics in North and South Korea*, p. 113.
[36] Suh, *Kim Il Sung*, p. 101.
[37] Il-sung Kim, *Kim Il-sung Selected Works (IV)* (Pyongyang: KWP Publishing, 1971) (in Korean), p. 346.

declared that the railway defence force was the "people's army and therefore we decided not to establish the party organizations within the army hierarchy to prevent the military from becoming the party's army."[38] After the DPRK was officially launched, and, in accordance with Chapter 8 of the 1948 constitution, the military's primary mission became to defend the sovereign right of the state and protect the people. Moreover, in December 1952, at the height of the Korean War, Kim Il-sung pronounced that the KPA was the people's armed force, which was organized by the liberated proletariat, the peasants, and the entire people.[39] Ultimately, the KPA was the people's armed force, not the KWP's, which defended the state and the people. At the same time, since the party organization was nonexistent, the KPA maintained its organizational cohesion and the unitary command system at the top of which Kim Il-sung was positioned as supreme leader, called *Suryong*.

From Factional Struggles to Power Monopoly (1960s): The Party's Army

The Korean War (1950–1953) fundamentally changed North Korea's political system in general and the party–military relations and the KPA's self-defined mission in particular. With the onset of the war, Kim Il-sung became chair of the Military Committee of the DPRK. In the beginning, the KPA easily overpowered the southern counterpart to the brink of complete unification under the North Korean flag. However, the United Nations' intervention and the Incheon landing led by Gen. MacArthur drastically changed the power balance; further, the KPA forces were disorganized and suffered from a lack of discipline in their scurried retreat to the north. Faced with the miserable defeat in the south and loss of morale in the military, Kim Il-sung hurriedly installed party cells in the KPA hierarchy and renamed the Culture Department of the KPA into the General Political Department (GPD) to discipline army officers. At the same time, political control of the KPA transferred from the Military Committee to the Central Committee of the KWP, so that the party's control over the military became institutionalized. In his address at the extended meeting of the Central Committee of the KWP, Kim declared that the "people's army is the party's army," which was led and disciplined by the party

[38] Hak-soon Baik, *Military and Politics in North Korea: Character, Status, and Roles* (Sungnam: Sejong Institute, 2011) (in Korean), pp. 10-11.
[39] Baik, *Military and Politics*, p. 15.

leadership.[40] In reality, however, the party's control over the military was not firmly established until 1961, when Kim Il-sung eradicated rival factions and monopolized power in the party.[41]

North Korean politics after the Korean War were the most tumultuous decade with power struggles among rival factions and massive purges of key elites in the KWP. In particular, the factional struggles revolved around three issues: failure in the Korean War; political-policy directions for post-war reconstruction; and political leadership structure. Naturally, Kim Il-sung was supposed to be blamed for the war failure because he initiated the war as supreme commander of the KPA. However, he utilized the war failure to purge his political rivals. Kim's first target was the Soviet-Koreans who were influential during the pre-war party-building period, but their influence shrank due to the Soviet Union's lack of support for the war. Kim condemned Heo Kai, a leading figure of the Soviet faction, "as a *party doctor* who knew it all but who could not even speak proper Korean."[42] He was reported to have committed suicide in August 1953 and was later condemned. Another target of the political purge was Pak Hon-yong, founder and leader of the JCP in Seoul. Pak was arrested in August 1953 and sentenced to death in December 1955 for espionage and an aborted armed coup d'état to overthrow the North Korean government. Kim Il-sung thus adroitly utilized the failed liberation war to eliminate his political rivals in the party.[43] With the purge of Pak and his faction followers, the South Korean faction was effectively eliminated from the power competition.

The factional power struggles also centred on how to build the war-ravaged North Korea. Kim Il-sung and his faction prioritized the heavy industry sectors to rebuild the war machine, while other communist factions opposed the radical mobilization of domestic resources at the expense of the agriculture and light industries.[44] Still, fiercer factional struggles focused on the nature of the political leadership structure. While Kim and his guerrilla faction wanted to concentrate powers in Kim's hands, other factions, i.e., Yanan and Soviet-Koreans, demanded a more party-centred collective leadership. Such

[40] Il-sung Kim, *Kim Il-sung Selected Works (VI)* (Pyongyang: KWP Publishing, 1980) (in Korean), p.356.
[41] Glenn D. Paige, *The Korean People's Democratic Republic* (Palo Alto: Hoover Institution Press, 1966),p. 48.
[42] Suh, *Kim Il Sung*, p. 126.
[43] Hak-soon Baik, *The History of Power in North Korea: Ideas, Identities, and Structures* (Seoul: Hanul, 2010) (in Korean).
[44] Ku, Lee, and Woo, *Politics in North and South Korea*, p. 114.

different visions of leadership were certainly influenced by the political changes that transpired in Moscow and Beijing. Upon assuming power in 1956, Khrushchev denounced his predecessor and de-Stalinized the party by building a party-centered collective leadership. In Beijing, Mao Zedong's post-civil war policy failures led to the Hundred Flowers Campaign (1956–1957), which gave intellectuals freedom to criticize the party lines. Such political changes in the patron states posed a threat to Kim Il-sung who was pursuing a Stalinist monolithic leadership in Pyongyang.

With support from Beijing and Moscow, the Yanan faction and the Soviet-Koreans conspired a coup d'état to remove Kim Il-sung while Kim was on his long trip to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. These factions criticized Kim for his personality cult and tried to dethrone him from his chair position through the Central Committee of the KWP voting in August 1956. However, the attempted coup failed because a majority of the Central Committee members still supported Kim. This August Faction Incident led to massive purges of the Yanan and Soviet-Korean factions in subsequent years for their "antiparty and factional tendencies" that were influenced by foreign forces. Most of the prominent leaders from the factions were either purged or left the country. The massive purges in the KWP were followed by the elimination of KPA leaders from the Yanan and Soviet factions. In particular, the 1958 Central Committee of the KWP convention voted to oust Choi Jong-Hak, director of the GPD and the Soviet faction member, along with hundreds of KPA officers from the Yanan and the Soviet factions for their antirevolutionary and factional tendencies.[45] As a result, by the end of the 1950s, there was no faction or political competitor to challenge Kim's leadership; the KWP Central Committee seats were filled with Kim's faction members, and only three Yanan and one Soviet faction members secured their seats in the Central Committee. The political dominance by Kim and his guerrilla faction completely transformed North Korea's political system from a Soviet-style party-centred state to one dominated by one dictator.[46] The KWP became Kim Il-sung's party and the KPA his military. Kim's

[45] Sung-jang Jung, *A Comparative Study of the Central Military Commission in the People's Republic of China and North Korea* (Sungnam: Sejong Institute, 2011) (in Korean), p. 89.
[46] Jongseok Woo, "Defining the Nature and Future of the Party-Military Relations in North Korea," *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 5, no. 3 (2018):pp. 227-244.

personality cult was along the lines of the cult of Mao in China with the Cultural Revolution, which began in 1966 and lasted until his death in 1976.

Once Kim Il-sung's guerrilla faction established hegemony in the party, they institutionalized the party's control over the military. Although the party cells were introduced at the height of the Korean War, the party's control over the military was not effective enough to instill the party's political and ideological lines because the army unit commanders wielded more power than the party officials. Since the late 1950s, however, Kim Il-sung has redefined the KPA as the party's armed force and institutionalized the party's control over the military. Kim declared that "the party committees are the collective political-military leadership bodies that determine all intra-military affairs."[47] In 1962, the KWP established the Military Committee as the highest military institution that was directly controlled by the Central Committee of the KWP. Four years later, the Military Committee articulated North Korea's official security policy line, called *Byungjin* (parallel development), with "Four Military Lines" that defined the country's military doctrine throughout the Cold War years, which included (1) arming the entire populace, (2) fortifying the entire country, (3) training the entire soldiers as a cadre army officer, and (4) modernizing the weapon systems.[48] The Military Committee's political status was further elevated when it was renamed the Central Military Commission (CMC) at the Sixth Party Congress held in 1980. Since then, the CMC's political status became even further elevated to be positioned in parallel with the Central Committee and make and announce important security policy decisions. It is notable that the hereditary succession from Kim Il-sung to Jong-il was officially pronounced at the Sixth Party Congress, as he was elected as a member of the Standing Committee of the Politburo, member of the CMC, and secretary of the Central Committee of the KWP. Kim Jong-il ensured his authority over the military through partisan channels for two decades prior to his pronounced leadership in 1998.

[47] Dae-geun Lee, *Why Doesn't the North Korean Army Make a Coup?* (Hanul, 2003) (in Korean), p. 61.
[48] Buyng Chul Koh, "'Military-First Politics' and Building a 'Powerful and Prosperous Nation' in North Korea," *Policy Forum Online*, Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainability (14 April 2015). https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/military-first-politics-and-building-a-powerful-and-prosperous-nation-in-north-korea/.

Meanwhile, the increasing role and influence of the GPD signified important changes in the KPA's self-defined identity from the people's armed forces to the party's. By the turn of the 1960s, two-party organs, i.e., the Military Committee and the GPD, were safeguarding the KPA as the party's army. The KPA has three different hierarchical channels of leadership structures: the party committees; the political commissars; and the general staff department. The party committees are set up at all levels of the KPA hierarchy to ideologically indoctrinate army officers and make important military decisions; the GPD deploys political commissars to carry out the political committee's decisions and evaluate KPA commanders; and the general staff department directs the military commanders. The KWP's control over the KPA created a dual-command system in which the field commanders must cosign with the political commissars for military operations, thereby effectively downgrading the KPA commanders as mere agents who truthfully implemented the party committee's directions.[49] Ultimately, the 1960s was the decade for Pyongyang in which the party consolidated its superiority over the military and Kim Il-sung exercised his power over the military through the partisan channels; the self-defined identity of the KPA was transformed from the people's army to the party's army.

Personalist Dictatorship and Hereditary Succession (1970s): Suryong's Army

Political changes in North Korea in the 1960s completely transformed the country's political system from a Muscovite communist state to a personalist dictatorship. Ideologically, Kim Il-sung's Juche ideology replaced Marxism-Leninism as the state's official ideology. Politically, while the Soviet Union as the creator of Pyongyang's political system came out of Stalin's totalitarian dictatorship and built a more party-centered and bureaucratized collective leadership, North Korea firmly built Kim Il-sung's one-man dictatorship with an extreme personality (and even family) cult. In terms of the military's political role and self-defined identity, the KPA became an armed force that would defend the Kim family regime and serve Kim and his family successors. In short, all political organs—the party, the military, and the cabinet—degenerated into mere political servants that existed to fulfil the dictator's political will.

[49] Woo, "Songun Politics," p. 257.

Kim Il-sung's personality cult was rooted in his ideology of Juche. In the first decade of state-building, North Korea espoused Marxism-Leninism as the state's official ideology and regarded Stalin as the leader of the communist world. Two decades later, however, the Soviet ideology was replaced with Juche. In its original form, Juche did not have a sophisticated logic but was formed and revised as a response to domestic and international political developments. At the early stage, the ideology emphasized independence, anti-imperialism (i.e., anti-Japan and anti-America), and antidogmatism (and antifactionalism). The ideology pursued independent political, economic, and foreign policy lines in the middle of ideological and military conflicts between the two communist superpowers, i.e., China and the Soviet Union. Juche declared "self-identity in thinking, independence in politics, self-support in economy and self-reliance in national defence."[50] With Juche's emphasis on independence, North Korea remained independent from the ideological and military conflicts between the two communist superpowers. At the same time, on the domestic political front, it effectively deterred the political influence of the Yanan and Soviet factions, which had deep connections with Beijing and Moscow. By emphasizing anti-imperialism, the ideology praised Kim's heroic leadership in the anti-Japanese guerrilla war in the 1930s and 1940s with mostly exaggerated and fabricated records. Kim Il-sung's personality cult was promoted by his son Kim Jong-il since the younger Kim became director of the Propaganda and Agitation Department (PAD). Kim Jong-il led the Movie and Arts Division of the PAD to produce movies and documentaries about his father's heroic leadership in the anti-Japanese guerrilla fighting. Moreover, Kim Jong-il wrote the "Ten Principles for the Establishment of the Juche Idea," which all North Koreans must memorize and apply in their self-criticisms on a regular basis. By the 1970s, Juche was not a mere offspring of Marxism-Leninism but one equal to it and creatively applied to the North Korean context. Further, in this process, Kim Jong-il emerged as the sole authoritative interpreter of the ideology, i.e., the one who would truthfully carry out his father's political will, and naturally positioned himself as the successor to his father.

Since Kim's guerrilla group cleansed rival factions in the party, the KWP emerged as the vanguard of the Juche revolution, which would enthusiastically follow the teachings of Kim Il-sung and his Juche ideology. North Korea began as a communist

[50] Yang, *The North and South Korean Political Systems*,p. 183.

party state; two decades later, the party became mere servant to Kim Il-sung.[51] In most communist party states, the dictator's political legitimacy comes from the party and the official state ideology that the party promotes. The dictator's political power and policy choices will necessitate endorsement from the party decisions. It will be the Politburo (Standing Committee) and the Central Committee of the party that interpret the state ideology and define the revolutionary missions that the state ideology envisions.[52] However, when the party system degenerates into personalist tendencies, the relationship is reversed so that the party and other political institutions become mere servants to the personalist dictator.

Kim Il-sung, i.e., *Suryong* (supreme leader), was positioned at the center of the power structure, creating an organic political system. According to the North Korean dictionary of political terms, Suryong establishes the party and the state, builds the tradition of revolution, and provides the party's philosophy.[53] Without Suryong, there is no party, no state, and no proletariat revolution. In this so-called monolithic system, Suryong functions as the brain, the KWP as the blood vessel that links Suryong to the people, and the populace as the biological organ.[54] Since the late 1960s, Kim's personality cult was expanded into a family cult to idolize his ancestors, wife, and son and began to build large monuments and museums across the country. Kim Il-sung's personalist dictatorship was formalized with the 1972 constitution (called "DPRK Socialist Constitution"), which formally pronounced Juche as North Korea's official ideology and created a new leadership position, called Jusok (president), with unchecked political power.[55] The 1998 constitution (called the "Songun Constitution") commemorated the deceased Kim as the "Eternal President of the Republic" to "defend and carry forward

[51] Ku, Lee, and Woo, *Politics in North and South Korea*.
[52] Andrew Scobell, *Kim Jong Il and North Korea: The Leader and the System* (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, 2006), p. 18.
[53] DPRK Academy of Social Science, *Dictionary of Political Terms* (Pyongyang: Social Science Publication, 1970) (in Korean), p. 196.
[54] Gap-sik Kim, "*Suryong*'s Direct Rule and the Political Regime in North Korea under Kim Jong Il," *Asian Perspective* 32, no. 3 (2008): p. 92.
[55] McEachern, *Inside the Red Box*, p. 90.

his ideas … on the Juche revolution under the leadership of the Workers Party of Korea."[56]

Kim Il-sung's personality cult made all major political institutions, including the party, the military, and the cabinet, the dictator's meagre servants that sustain their *raison d'être* only through the dictator's recognition. This became prominent in the KPA's self-defined mission. Kim's personalist control over the military began with the purge of his own partisan group members who filled the political positions, thus augmenting their power in the party, and the military after rival factions had been purged. Some of Kim's guerrilla faction members pursued adventurous military operations that attempted commando raids to assassinate Park Jung-hee, the South Korean dictator, and armed attacks on South Korea in 1968. Kim Il-sung purged his comrades, including Kim Chang-bong (defence minister), Choe Kwang (chief of staff of the KPA), Ho Bong-hak (director of the Liaison Bureau), Kim Kwang-hyop (vice premier), and Yi Yong-ho (member of the Political Committee), and Sok San (minister of public security), among others (Choe Kwang was restored later). By purging the politically influential KPA generals from his own guerrilla group, no politically prominent KPA elites existed to challenge Kim Il-sung's political dominance. The purge of the abovementioned Gapsan members was followed by the rise of Kim's own family members, which included Kim's younger brother Kim Yong-ju (a high-ranking Political Committee member), Kim's wife Kim Song-ae (Cahir of the Democratic Women's Union of Korea), and Kim's son Kim Jong-il (director of the PAD and OGD, member of the Central Committee of the KWP).[57]

As soon as Kim Jong-il was unofficially anointed as successor to his father, North Korea launched massive political campaigns that the KPA was Suryong's and the next Suryong's army. KPA leadership declared that it forever honour and advance Kim Il-sung's revolutionary tradition and carry it forward to the next-generation leadership.[58] Kim Jong-il, called *Dang Jungang* (Party Center), propagandized the slogan "Devote our lives to defend the great Suryong!" [59] The propaganda went even further to urge

[56] Young Hwan Kihl and Hong Nak Kim, eds., *North Korea: The Politics of Regime Survival* (M.E. Sharpe, 2006), p. 7.
[57] Suh, *Kim Il Sung*, p. 242.
[58] Suzuki Masayuki, *Kim Jong Il and Suryong Socialism* (Seoul: Jungang Daily Inc., 1994), p. 132.
[59] Hak-soon Baik, *Military and Politics in North Korea: Character, Status, and Roles* (Sungnam: Sejong Institute, 2011) (in Korean), p. 46.

allegiance to the next-generation Suryong (Kim Jong-il himself). Kim Jong-il's effort at making the KPA his armed force was briefly faced with opposition in the party and the military. At the KWP Politburo meeting in June 1976, a few prominent leaders openly expressed their opposition to the family succession, the so-called Kim Dong-kyu Incident. The incident led to a purge of Kim Dong-kyu (vice president), Yi Yong-moo (GPD director), and Yu Jang-sik (alternate member of the Politburo of the KWP), among others. After the incident, Kim Il-sung moved the anniversary of the KPA from 8 February 1948 to 25 April 1932, the date that Kim Il-sung founded the anti-Japanese guerrilla unit. Such change signified that the KPA was built by Kim Il-sung based on his anti-Japanese revolutionary mission, and the only successor to such revolutionary tradition was Kim Jong-il. In the end, the KPA as Suryong's armed force was Kim Il-sung's army and concurrently the next Suryong Kim Jong-il's military.[60]

Conclusions

This article details North Korea's political transformations from state-building in 1948 to the 1970s and how such changes affected the KPA's self-defined identity and political roles thereafter. During the early decades, Kim Il-sung transitioned Pyongyang's political system transitioned from a Soviet-style communist party-state to a personalist dictatorship. Kim established his dynasty through power struggles with rival factions—in particular, the Yanan and the Soviet factions—throughout the 1950s. The outcome was Kim's personalist rule in which major political institutions, i.e., the party, the military, and the cabinet, were degenerated into mere servants to the dictatorship. At the heart of Kim's personalist dictatorship was his own Manchurian guerrilla faction with roughly 200-strong partisans. In particular, the guerrilla faction members constituted the core leadership in the KPA, which became the main agents of the three-generation Kim family dictatorship. The KPA was created in 1948 as the people's armed force, which maintained institutional separation from the KWP; this separation prevented the KPA from being intertwined with the factional struggles in the party. Once the rival factions were eliminated from the party and Kim's guerrilla group fully controlled the KWP, Kim and his guerrilla faction established partisan control systems in the KPA, making the military

[60] Baik, *Military and Politics*, p. 48.

the party's armed force. By the end of the 1960s, Pyongyang's political system instituted Kim's one-man dictatorship with his Juche ideology, personality (and family) cult, and hereditary succession to Kim Jong-il. The KPA firmly established its self-identity and mission as an armed force for Kim Il-sung and his hereditary descendants.

The analysis in this article explains why North Korean politics did not experience the political turmoil and possible leadership turnover that most personalist regimes commonly experience. The North Korean case is truly an outlier among the personalist regimes in the world, considering that it survived when most other communist allies in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe suffered regime collapse. It endured diplomatic isolation, the death of Kim Il-sung, an economic downturn and termination of the public distribution system, and ensuing massive famine and defections to neighbouring countries, all of which overlapped during the 1990s. In most personalist regimes, coups have been found to be a more frequent source of regime collapse than popular protests or external shock (including war). The North Korean case illustrates that the military's steadfast support for the Kim family rule for three generations has been the most crucial component of regime resilience. Moreover, this article demonstrates that such loyalty by the KPA was firmly entrenched in Pyongyang's political system in the 1960s and 1970s; North Korea's system, including ideology, personalist rule, and party-military relations, has remained intact since then.

The analysis in this article explains why Kim Jong-il's Songun politics did not degenerate into a political system dominated by the military. Numerous scholarly works have misinterpreted Songun politics as a political system dominated by the KPA, Kim's heavy dependence on the military for regime survival, and therefore highly unstable and prone to military coup.[61] However, the assessment proved to be inaccurate, when Kim Jong-un assumed leadership from his father and massive purges of highest-ranking KPA generals from his father's era. The KPA's political status was further demoted when the

[61] Ilpyong Kim, "Kim Jong Il's Military-First Politics," in *North Korea, pp.*59-74; Oh and Hassig, *North Korea Through*; Chung-in Moon and Hideshi Takesada, "North Korea: Institutionalized Military Intervention," in *Coercion and Governance: The Declining Political Role of the Military in Asia*, ed. Muthiah Alagappa (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 357-382; Dae-sook Suh, "Military-First Politics of Kim Jong-il," *Asian Perspective* 26, no. 3 (2002): pp. 145-167.

current Kim speedily ended his father's Songun legacy and returned to the party-centered political system from his grandfather's era. Once again, many Pyongyang observers questioned Kim Jong-un's ability to control politically outgrown military generals and expected a system overshadowed by KPA leadership. [62] Inaccurate assessments about the KPA's political role repeatedly occur because they fail to reflect on the fact that the KPA established its own identity and self-defined mission in the 1960s and 1970s and remained unchanged throughout the three-generation Kim family rule. Ultimately, Kim Jong-un is likely to continue to enjoy relative regime stability as long as the KPA's role remains intact.

[62] Michael Moynihan, "Kim Jong Un and the Myth of the Reformer Dictator," *Daily Beast* (23 December 2013). http://www.thedailybeast.com/kim-jong-un-and-the-myth-of-the-reformer-dictator; Victor Cha, "Kim Jong Un is No Reformer," *Foreign Policy* (21 August 2012). https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/08/21/kim-jong-un-is-no-reformer/.

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