

# **The 8th Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea, Related Conferences, and the New Five-Year Plan for National Economic Development (Summary)**

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In the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the 8th Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), the 1st Plenary Meeting of the 8th WPK Central Committee, the 4th Session of the 14th Supreme People's Assembly (SPA), the 2nd Plenary Meeting of the 8th WPK Central Committee, the 1st Enlarged Meeting of the 8th Central Military Commission of the WPK, the Enlarged Plenary Meeting of the Cabinet, and the 13th Plenary Meeting of 14th SPA Standing Committee were held between January 5 and March 4, 2021.

At the 8th Congress of the WPK, the nature of the congress was defined as a congress for work, struggle, and progress. It reviewed the work of WPK since the 7th Congress in May 2016, including the Five-year Strategy for National Economic Development. Kim Jong Un praised WPK activities in a summary, laid the foundation for growth in a harsh environment, and pointed out that most of the goals listed in the five-year strategy had not been achieved. He examined domestic factors and made critical comments regarding the state of the party and the government, as well as the need for improved economic management.

In the party central committee election, candidates who were not only faithful to the party and the revolution but also possessed practical ability were sought after, and many newcomers whose names were previously unknown in Chinese character were elected as members and alternate members of the central committee. At the 1st Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the WPK, numerous relatively young executives were posted to key positions in the party. This tendency was also observed in the selection of cabinet members (deputy prime ministers and ministers) at the 4th Session of the 14th SPA and among newly selected commanders at the 1st Enlarged Meeting of the 8th Central Military Commission of the WPK.

At the 7th Congress of the WPK, Kim Jong Un admitted that economic construction was not proceeding as smoothly as hoped. However, in the 8th Congress, party executives and the cabinet criticized themselves and discussed improvement measures, and subcommittees were held to share opinions on the draft decision. In addition, a significant rejuvenation of executives was made during the congress.

Regarding the Five-year National Economic Development plan, a separate decision had not been published at the time of printing of this article, but according to the article of *Rodong Shinmun* on January 9 on Kim Jong Un's report on the work of the 7th Central Committee of the Party from Jan. 5 to Jan. 7 and that on January 13 in his concluding speech, the five-year plan was said to be aimed at strengthening the foundations of the economy and would be managed by the central government for future development rather than major changes in new industrial policies over the next five years. Emphasis was placed on improving the basic physical strength of the state-owned sector, centering on state-owned enterprises, and the strengthening of production cooperation within the state-owned sector. Interestingly, the steady implementation of plans was stressed rather than individual concrete figures.

It can be said that the Kim Jong Un era has shifted from a startup phase to one of full-scale operation, with the 8th Congress seen as an opportunity to trumpet this change. Through features of the 8th Congress, we might be able to observe the difference of Kim Jong Un from his predecessors; he has a relatively strong reform tendency and does not shy away from innovation while inheriting traditions. We also confirmed that some politicians and bureaucrats were unable to keep up with his breakneck speed. It seems that this series of conferences has made public General Secretary Kim Jong Un's declaration to operate the party and the government in his own style. The 13<sup>th</sup> Plenary Meeting of 14<sup>th</sup> SPA Standing Committee saw the adoption of DPRK law on social insurance and social security. This can mark a new era in corporate downsizing for money-losing state-owned enterprises.

Put plainly, Kim Jong Un's style is to judge a person not only by their speech but also by actions and achievements. To achieve his goals, he is willing to change the way things used to be. His style could be described as rational and one which seeks an objective method that relies on science and technology. Such a style is hard to keep up with, particularly for many executives of the DPRK, who are meticulous in their observance of precedent, doctrine and superficial obedience. Through this series of conferences, a bold rejuvenation of party and governmental leaders has taken place. Since Kim Jong Un tends to expect results to be produced in a relatively short period of time, this can be difficult for even the most skillful executive to achieve. Given the uncertainties in the external environment, we must wait at least three to five years to see whether the changes seen in the recent Congress might bring about positive changes in the DPRK.

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