

# Issue Brief

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The Fate of Premier Kim Tok Hun,  
the North Korean "Dirt Spoon"

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## Abstract

After Kim Jong Un severely reprimanded the Cabinet Premier, Kim Tok Hun, last summer, many anticipated a purge or demotion. However, the premier still displays an active presence in the new year. Kim Tok Hun is a North Korean "dirt spoon" success story: a factory manager turned Cabinet Premier and Kim Jong Un's avatar. Heavily burdened with economic responsibilities and bread-and-butter issues, Premier Kim has survived various career crises. However, Kim Jong Un's appointment of Premier Kim Tok Hun will prove to be a high-stake risk. This paper examines some of the reasons why.

### Keywords

Cabinet Premier, Kim Tok Hun, Dirt Spoon, Avatar, Appointment, High-Stake Risk

# The Fate of Premier Kim Tok Hun, the North Korean "Dirt Spoon"

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At the 9th Plenum of the 8th WPK Central Committee held in late December 2023, Kim Jong Un and his closest associates appeared at the meeting hall in four top-of-the-line Mercedes Benz vehicles as if to mock the international community's sanctions against the country. While Kim Jong Un and Kim Tok Hun had chauffeurs with the highest protocol, Jo Yong Won and Choe Ryong Hae drove the cars themselves. Such an appearance not only displayed Kim Tok Hun's second-ranking position in the state hierarchy but also confirmed his strong authority. For most people, it is hard to believe that the target of Kim Jong Un's wrath last summer is still in power.

On August 21, 2023, Kim Jong Un lashed out with expletives at Premier Kim Tok Hun while touring the Ansok Tideland Reclamation Area in South Pyongan, an area undergoing recovery from flood damage. Kim Jong Un's harsh words were published verbatim in Rodong Sinmun, North Korea's state-run newspaper. The intensity of Kim Jong Un's rebukes was quite severe as he reprimanded the premier and senior officials as "hopeless, arrogant and brazen, good-for-nothings, politically immature, mental under-wits, idlers" for their "deliberate negligence" and

warned of "censure, severe punishment, party expulsion, and thorough inspection."

It is unusual for the "Compassionate Father of the People" and "Great Supreme Leader" to voice such harsh expletives and have Rodong Sinmun publish them in the "highly dignified" WPK newspaper. In the past, there have been rare accounts of close associates whispering incidents where senior officials would faint or suffer heart attacks after being chastised by Kim Jong Il's thunder-like criticisms.

Many who heard of Kim Tok Hun's news anticipated a purge somewhat similar to Jang Song Thaek, Kim Jong Nam, or Pak Nam Ki. However, Kim Jong Un's enigmatic behavior defied public expectations. Kim Tok Hun has not fallen from power, but is still alive and maintains his position as North Korea's premier.

### **From Factory Manager to Premier, a "Dirt Spoon" Success Story**

Coming From a working-class background, Kim Tok Hun graduated from Kim Chaek University of Technology, and served as the manager of the Taeon Heavy Machinery Complex. After Kim Jung Un assumed power, Kim Tok Hun was appointed the WPK Secretary of Jagang Province. Ten years later, he became North Korea's premier to lead the country's economy and internal affairs.

Kim Tok Hun lacks the background and requirements for success in North Korea's bureaucratic society, namely, *songbun*

(communist partisan), kinship (family of a patriotic martyr), and regionalism (Pyongyang native). Thus, it is noteworthy that he achieved a "dirt spoon" success story solely with his capabilities and without any connections or support. Kim Tok Hun is the largest beneficiary of the North Korean-style personnel management system, which strives to employ an appropriate mix of old, middle-aged, and young cadres and officials with military and working-class backgrounds to prevent sectarianism and power grouping. In some ways, such governing tactics are one of the factors that have enabled the extension of the country's regime.

The premier's secret to success is his bulldozer personality that stops at nothing before achieving his goal. Kim Jong Un, with a similar temperament, seems to have felt a sense of connection to the premier. Kim Jong Un most likely judged that Kim Tok Hun, a loner with no connections, would remain his loyal right arm even after gaining power.

### **Kim Jong Un's Stress Management Avatar**

Jo Yong Won is known as Kim Jong Un's shadow, while Kim Tok Hun is his avatar. Jo Yong Won quietly surveils and controls North Korea's elite group behind the scenes as Chief of the Organization and Guidance Department. Premier Kim frequently appears in front of the public as he performs his duty of overlooking public sentiment.

Kim Jong Un has likely employed Jo Yong Won and Kim Tok Hun as his shadow and avatar to alleviate his "governing stress." The

system of North Korea's supreme leader dictatorship is where each working department reports directly to Kim Jong Un and receives directives. Under such a system, Kim Jong Un can only suffer from the vast workload and complex decision-making structure.

With a tendency to avoid complicated issues, primarily economic matters, Kim Jong Un's central focus is on nuclear development and military strategies. Kim most likely has eschewed economic, industrial, and livelihood issues, which have shown no improvement for decades. His lack of attention to the economy has also affected the cabinet and hindered its ability to execute decent economic policies.

After the 8th Party Congress, Kim Jong Un appointed Kim Tok Hun as premier to strengthen the cabinet government. In addition, Kim Jong Un has redirected public dissatisfaction to the premier by nominating a technocrat instead of a party or military official to oversee the people's bread-and-butter issues.

### **Survival of the North Korean "Phoenix"**

After being severely chastised by Kim Jong Un last August, it is a miracle that Kim Tok Hun emerged unscathed with only a strict warning and light punishment. Kim Jong Un reshuffled the cabinet's economic officials during the Supreme People's Assembly held in January 2021. He also criticized the economic plan of the cabinet during the 2nd Plenum of the 8th WPK Central Committee in which he replaced Kim Doo Il, the head of the

economic department, within one month of appointment. Even during such reshuffles, Kim Tok Hun consolidated his position as premier.

Premier Kim's solid foothold implies the absence of an avatar alternative and that Kim Jong Un's faith in Kim Tok Hun might be deeper than most experts had assessed as a short-lived premier.

### **Kim Jong Un's High-Stake Risk in Appointing Kim Tok Hun**

The longer Kim Jong Un entrusts Premier Kim with domestic affairs, the more it will undermine the Supreme Leader's ruling power. This is due to several reasons. First, it generates a "principal-agent problem." There is a grim possibility that Kim Tok Hun will be able to solve North Korea's chronic economic difficulties under the current situation with global sanctions. It is also nearly impossible to satisfy the expectations of both Kim Jong Un and North Korean residents. Against this backdrop, Kim Tok Hun will likely exaggerate his achievements while concentrating on short-term projects with immediate and concrete results to avoid being purged for economic failures. As a result, this will distort the allocation of resources and further weaken the regime.

In October 2023, North Korea made an unprecedented announcement in Rodong Sinmun listing its top ten companies, including construction, agricultural, and fishery businesses, while excluding key industries such as steel, chemical, and power,

which displays the abnormality of North Korea's resource distribution and industrial structure.

Second, reducing Kim Jong Un's "on-the-spot guidance" in the economic and livelihood sectors while delegating more authority to Kim Tok Hun will catalyze North Koreans to realize Kim Jong Un's fabricated imagery as the "people's leader."

"On-the-spot guidance" is essential to the Kim family's "symbol manipulation" in guaranteeing the permanence of the North Korean dictatorship. Kim Jong Un's predecessors used "on-the-spot guidance" practices to construe interactions with the general public and advance their images as the "Compassionate Father of the People." Kim Jong Un's continued avoidance of bread-and-butter issues while shifting responsibility to the premier will provide an opportunity for the North Koreans to realize the propaganda and fabricated imagery of the "people's leader."

Such signals have already appeared in Rodong Sinmun. On August 8, 2023, the state-run newspaper published the premier's "field survey" photo on the front page next to the leading article, a section usually reserved for the "supreme dignity."

Third, strengthened economic management led by Kim Tok Hun will exacerbate division among authorities and increase public disaffection. The Kim Tok Hun-led cabinet system works under the premise that special agencies of the party and military lay down their vested interests. The cabinet's strengthened grip on the economy will fuel grievance among special units protecting



the regime, such as the Ministry of State Security, Reconnaissance General Bureau, and the military, and thus, will inevitably result in a conflict of interests over limited resources.

During the early years of his reign, Kim Jong Un introduced market economy elements such as the socialist enterprise responsibility management system and field responsibility system. However, the cabinet under Kim Tok Hun is regressing to the exploitative central management system of the past by scraping food and available resources while restoring state-run commercial networks. Such measures will further oppress the already limited economic activities of North Koreans and worsen its food insecurity, which in turn will contribute to a more hostile public sentiment toward Kim Jong Un.

Hence, "principal" Kim Jong Un who has turned his back on the public, tyrannized the people, and destructed the lives of the absolute majority for the interests of the few, and "agent" Kim Tok Hun will ultimately face a future of apprehension, quandary, and eventual downfall.

***The views and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official position of INSS.***