

# ISSUE BRIEF

## Executive Summary

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## Evaluation of the 14th Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) of North Korea

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At the 12th session of North Korea's 14th Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) in January, Kim Jong Un's policy speech provided no indication of North Korea's policy direction toward the United States. Nor was there any announcement regarding constitutional amendments removing the concepts of "reunification" and "one people".

Two years have passed since the five-year term of assembly deputies expired, highlighting that North Korea's SPA functions merely as a symbolic "sovereign institution" and an auxiliary body to the Workers' Party's policy decisions. However, the SPA plays a role in legitimizing these decisions and reflecting the distribution of power among governing institutions. Additionally, statements made by Kim Jong Un and other officials at SPA sessions carry considerable implications.

Given this context, this Issue Brief analyzes the activities of the 14th SPA over the past six years since April 2019.

### Conclusion and Implications

There is no clear evidence that the SPA's status has risen within North Korea's power structure during its 14th term. Kim Jong Un was omitted from the list of officials elected to the SPA. Key national authority roles have shifted from the Chairman of the SPA Standing Committee to the President, and the Chairman's ranking within the Politburo Presidium has fallen below that of the Premier.

Despite this, there have been some functional changes. The SPA has become more institutionalized, legislative activities have increased, and a system allowing multiple nominees for deputy positions has been partially implemented. Nevertheless, the SPA remains largely a subordinate body responsible for legitimizing and enforcing the Workers'

Party's policies. North Korea's regime continues to operate as a strong party dictatorship, and the SPA plays only a minimal role.

However, the SPA's role is expected to evolve gradually as Kim Jong Un seeks to reflect public sentiment in his policies, as seen in last year's regional development policies. For the SPA to function similarly to China's National People's Congress during its reform era or East Germany's parliament during reunification, North Korea's rigid *Suryong* (Leader)-Party dictatorship must loosen. Additionally, North Korean citizens must become aware of what the regime's self-proclaimed status as the "longest-standing socialist government" means from an external perspective.

One possible approach is to encourage comparisons between the parliamentary systems of the two Koreas, particularly given *Rodong Sinmun*'s coverage of South Korea's recent presidential impeachment. To foster political pluralism in North Korea, various measures should be taken to instill awareness of human rights, reinforce the principle of popular sovereignty, and support civil society development. Expanding checks and balances among governing institutions is also crucial.

Given the current lack of direct exchanges and cooperation between the two Koreas, South Korea could engage North Korean defectors, use alternative communication channels, or encourage countries with diplomatic ties to both Koreas to facilitate inter-parliamentary exchanges. Though a long-term challenge, revitalizing intergovernmental dialogue and expanding parliamentary and civil-level exchanges with North Korea could contribute to its reform, openness, and political pluralization.

East Germany's experience provides a useful precedent. Between the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and reunification in October 1990, the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) collapsed, and the East German *Volkskammer* (People's Chamber) played an active role in democratization and unification through legislative efforts. In the long run, a similar trajectory could emerge in North Korea, with the SPA—rather than the ruling Workers' Party—taking on a greater role in legislative efforts toward reform, openness, pluralization, and, ultimately, reunification.

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