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### **Civil Service Reform in Korea**

Reform in almost every situation manifests itself in response to an issue reaching a critical point. Civil service reform is occurring around the world in response to the need of governments to adapt to a variety of issues and to the rapidly changing world we live in. Governments around the world are unable to continue to function as they have done in the past if they are to face these issues and provide services to the citizens they serve. Though the civil service of each country acknowledges the need to change the system, each country's reform takes on a unique form that reflects the culture and concerns of the citizens and the civil servants who work within that system.

The universal concerns about the civil service focus on the way in which government does business with its citizens, its ability to retain experienced and skilled workers and the inability to sufficiently motivate civil servants to perform. Concerns are also raised about the ability of the government to adapt quickly to the changing needs of the society. There is also the universal image of the civil service itself. Any faults are seen to be the responsibility of the civil servants rather than the system that they function in (Civil Service Reform, 1996).

Though Korea is facing these universal issues, they also have to address some issues that are uniquely Korean.

### **History of the Civil Service in Korea.**



*Changdeokgung Palace, Korean Civil Service Exams  
took place in this building during the reign of King Seonjan (1567-1608)*

Civil service reform is not new to Korea. King Seonjan, who ruled Korea from 1567 to 1608, is primarily remembered for rebuilding Korea after many years of political corruption and for reforming the civil service examination process. Prior to the change, the exams were given literature. The King Seonjan required that exams emphasize politics and history.

### **Japanese Control**

Japan has invaded Korea twice, in 1592 and again in 1597, and has taken control of the country once beginning in 1905. In 1905, the Eulsa Treaty was signed by the Korea and Japan, however, the Korean cabinet signed the treaty under extreme duress. Emperor Gojong of Korea never signed the

treaty, so in effect the treaty was void under Korean law. This treaty made Korea a protectorate of Japan. The Korean royal palace was under the control of Japanese troops and Japanese troops were stationed at strategic sites throughout Korea. In reaction to the treaty, Emperor Gojong sent a secret envoy to the Hague to protest the treaty. This resulted in the Japanese forcing the Emperor abdication in favor of his son and a new agreement put in place. The Japan-Korea Annexation Treaty of 1907 gave the Japanese Resident-General the power to fire top officials and that all high-ranking officials must be Japanese. The Korean army and all judicial and policing powers were put under the control of the Japanese. Finally, the Japanese gained full control under the *1910 Treaty of Annexation of Korea by Japan*. Japanese believed that the Koreans were incapable of ruling themselves which is demonstrated by the wording of the treaty:

*the existing system of government in that country has not proved entirely equal to the duty of preserving public order and tranquility; and in addition, the spirit of suspicion and misgiving dominates the whole peninsula.*

*In order to maintain peace and stability in Korea, to promote the prosperity and welfare of Koreans, and at the same time to ensure the safety and repose of foreign residents, it has been made abundantly clear that fundamental changes in the actual regime of government are absolutely essential. (USC– UCLA Joint East Asian Studies Center)*

## **After World War II**

Japanese control ended in 1945 after surrendering to the United States. Korea is divided and the US military took control of South Korea. The military were unprepared for the administration of the country. Eventually, they set up the Korean Advisory Council, out of which grew an interim government. The Republic of Korea was established in 1948 and Syngman Rhee was elected the first president. The first modern civil service was formed ( Kim,Young Pyoung, 1997) but continued to use some the colonial systems. Article 25 of the Korean constitution stated that citizens have the right to elect their civil servants. The National Civil Service act was put in place in 1949 (ibid, P78). Kim argues that many of the old ways of Confucianism and authoritarianism still lingered from previous regimes. These old habits prevented the new merit based civil service system from succeeding.

### **The 2<sup>nd</sup> republic (1960 – 1961)**

A student revolt placed the Democratic Party in power in 1960. Due to the corruptions during Rhee's presidency (he used marital law, suppressed opposition groups and jailed people who do what he wanted), the Democratic Party and Prime Minister Chang decentralized the bureaucracy to local governments. They also amended the constitution so that the President had a minor role and that the real control of the government lay with the prime minister. However, due to financial struggle and infighting among elites, the new system failed. A military coup occurred in 1961 because it was believed there was too much corruption in Chang's government.

### **Military Rule and the 3<sup>rd</sup> & 4<sup>th</sup> Republics (1961 – 1979)**

President Park dominated Korean politics from 1961 to 1979. Park led the military revolution against Chang's government. Military rule was in place until 1967. During this period, the size of the Korean civil service grew rapidly from 237 employees in 1960 to 425,000 in 1970. The ex-military personnel dominated the government from 1961 – 1967. The rapid expansion was partly due to the employment

of ex-military officers into traditionally civil service jobs. Due to their military background the hierarchy continued and this aggravated conflict between the civil servants and the military employees. President Park was elected president in 1967 and in 1972. In contrast to Chang's government, Park's regime was noted for its centralization of power. In 1968, a law was passed removing all power from local areas. Local agents were appointed and local legislation was enacted by the Minister of Home affairs. Local governments primary role was to carry out central government policy. This highly centralized government also resulted in a lot more corruption. At the same The rapid economic development and modernization, for which President Park is credited for, resulted conflict and political instability. President Park was assassinated in 1979.

### **Post-Park Government**

After the assassination of Park, military coup resulted in another 8 years of military rule. Elections were held in 1987. However, this too resulted in another military president was elected. The first civilian president in 30 years was elected in 1992. In 1997, President Kim was elected. He attempted to improve relations with North Korea, however, his efforts were surrounded in controversy and he too was accused of corruption. The next president Moo-hyun Roh, elected in 2002, was also impeached on charges of corruption.

### **The Republic of Korea Civil Service**

Today the South Korean civil service, like other countries, is trying to adapt to the changing global economy and the changing needs of its citizens. The Civil Service Commission was set up on May 24, 1999 to address such needs. The Republic of Korea has several issues that are unique. Unlike many countries, there is a possibility that one day both the North Korea and South Korea will reunite, much like Germany. Though its seems unlikely that there will be unification in the immediate future, the civil service must be prepared in the event that it does reunite with its neighbor. Despite its rapid industrialized and modernization, we can see from its history that corruption has occurred in some form in each administration. Unlike the US, where there is some separation between those in power and those who implement policies, the South Korean civil servant has developed an image as being one and the same as those in power. This due to the military domination of the civil service in South Korea. South Korea is currently in the process of "civilianizing" of both their politics and their civil service (Kim, Bun Woong). The military influence and the history of government in Korea continue to affect the image of the South Korean civil servant. Citizens view the civil servants as being just as corrupt as those in power. They are viewed as the ones who carried out the laws on behalf of the government (Kim, Young-Pyoung, 1997). Despite reform attempts, citizens believe civil servants to be wasteful and authoritarian (ibid). Confucianism is cited as one of reasons for this. In Confucianism Civil servants are higher in status than most other Koreans. Another issue that the civil service must address is gender equity. In South Korea, women traditionally stay at home. However, there are attempts to change this by offering more family friendly environments. They have also had to address the way in which civil servants achieve seniority. The traditional rank-in-person system makes it difficult for government to inject new life into the service. Since the civil service is a job for life, the same problems occur as they do elsewhere; it is very difficult to change the culture with employees who are used to doing things a certain way.

### **Civil Service Reform**

In South Korea, civil service reform has begun in reaction to decades of upheaval and corruption. The civil service commission was set up to address these uniquely Korean issues, as well as the more global issues facing all governments.

The Civil Service Commission functions are:

1. Establish basic personnel policies and civil service reform agendas
2. Screen appointment and promotion of senior civil servants
3. Introduced job analysis and performance-based personnel system
4. Coordinate training and education system
5. administer recruitment examination
6. develop HR Database for public service and manage e-HRM system
7. hear and determine appeals of civil servants
8. provide improved remuneration and benefits.

Republic of Korea Civil Service Commission Website

The commission is comprised of four commissioners who are appointed by the president with the consent of congress. The secretariat consists of seven branches:

1. Division of General Services
2. Office of Planning and Management
3. Bureau of Personnel Policy
4. Bureau of HR Development
5. Bureau of Performance and Remuneration
6. Office of Hr Information
7. Bureau of Senior Civil Service Project

### **Changing the Culture**

There is strong drive to change the culture among the long term Korean civil servants. In particular, there are specific concerns regarding senior civil servants. Productivity has become problematic among the long-term civil servants. In addition, it was common practice for political regimes to fill certain civil service positions by political appointees.

The South Korean civil service has recently moved towards using an open competitive exam to inject new life into the senior civil service. Despite its success in hiring good people, there are some concerns about the current system's ability to keep those hired motivated. It has become particularly problematic among those who pass the most prestigious Senior Civil Service exam. They tend to stagnate because they cannot be fired. The current system is based on rank-in-person system. This is a system normally used in the military or foreign service (Personnel mgt in Gov P241). People usually start at the bottom and move their way up. If they don't progress at certain rate, employees are asked to leave or retire. However, when jobs are for life you cannot ask someone to leave.

The goal of open competitive exam hire the best people into the senior civil service. The exams are seen as objective, which is supposed to mean that anyone from any background can apply (Cho). The civil service is also failing to attract young talented people who can earn more money in the private sector. The open competition is seeking to attract younger people into the more senior level positions.

The open position system was introduced in 1999 and hoped to introduce more competition for jobs with the civil service. Each ministry was asked to designate 20% of its positions for open competition, rather than solely hire internally. The jobs are announced publicly and anyone who meets the criteria is eligible to apply. Also in 1999, performance-related pay was introduced to motivate and encourage civil servants to be more productive.

The other culture shift that is occurring is the movement away from political appointees to top civil service management. In the past, employment was offered as a political favor and occurred behind closed doors with no accountability. The appointments are now made on merits and qualifications. The government also set up a website or “Samgochoryo” to assist with political appointments and a database is being created to track people with particular skills and expertise.

### **Other reforms**

There continues to be an underrepresentation of women, people with disabilities and people from non-metropolitan Seoul regions. With this lack of representation of the people, we can see how the image of the Korean civil servant is linked not to the military but also as those who are at the center of power. The current demographics of the civil service do not fully represent the Korean people.

The Korean civil service commission is trying to change this. The Korean civil service is male dominated. On the Civil Service Commission website, the government admits that it has been neglecting women. The website cites Confucian culture and its emphases on patriarchy for the exclusion of women from the civil service. The Korean government created a promotion plan call the “Quarter System for More Female Workforce within the Public Sector”. However, female participation in the senior levels is only about 4.8%. A second proposal set a goal to fill 10% of senior administrators with women. The government has implement rigorous measures to increase the number of women in senior roles. Each ministry is required to establish a “5 year promotion plan for female manager appointees” and the government has become more “gender” sensitive and plans to track personnel data on its female employees. They also hope to attract more women by making the environment more mother-friendly. The government's affirmative action plans also seek to increase the number of disabled employees and the government will assign quotas to encourage the hiring of more people from the non-metro Seoul area. Their affirmative action policy also includes efforts to hire more scientists and engineers.

Other reforms include creation of a personnel policy support system (PPSS) which would manage human resources from when they are hired to when they retire. Tracking of performance has been emphasized for senior managers and 360 evaluations are used. Training and development is being focused on consumer-oriented training and they also hope to professionalize the civil service by creating career development programs and identifying clear career paths for employees. Of course, they too need to compete with the private sector so they are implementing salary reform and performance-based pay system for higher level positions to help motivate those who may have stagnated.

### **The Future**

Though civil service reform is occurring within most governments, the Republic of Korea has had to face some unique challenges and are still reeling from mistakes made by past administrations. It may take as many decades to undo these mistakes as it did to create them. However, South Korea also went from being a 3<sup>rd</sup> world to a 1<sup>st</sup> world country in a matter of decades. There is evidence both that the number of women in senior positions and the number of disabled employees have steadily increased but it has not been a rapid change. Fortunately, there is a clear movement away from military control of the government to a more civilian one, which can only serve to encourage more change.

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